JASON M BUSS

Chlorine & Ink

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Contents

Preface		iv
1	BOOKISH BOY	1
2	SECRET BOY	14
3	BIRTHDAY BOY	26
4	VIRAL BOY	48
5	PRETTY BOY	74
6	BURNING BOY	88
7	BURNT BOY	104
8	WOODEN BOY	125
9	SHOW BOY	150
10	FREE BOY	199
11	REAL BOY	210

Preface

These songs were playing constantly while I wrote this book, so they became woven into its emotional architecture. They're in the rhythm of the scenes, the atmosphere, the longing, the tension. In a lot of ways, this playlist is part of the novel itself.

If you listen while you read, you'll be experiencing the story alongside the same music that filled my headphones while I was building Jesse's world scene by scene. Certain songs became attached to specific moments, emotions, and characters so completely that I still can't hear them without immediately seeing the story unfold again in my head.

I hope this soundtrack pulls you deeper into the world of Chlorine & Ink and makes the experience feel even more intimate, immersive, and alive.

1. **Girlfriend** - Maxwell Luke
2. **Plastic Ferrari** - Gregory Dillon
3. **Handsy** - Yavin
4. **Seven Minutes In Heaven** - Who Is Fancy
5. **Indie Alt Boys** - Ghostryder
6. **Don't Need Heaven** - MakeYouKnowLove
7. **Sex (With My Ex)** - Fletcher
8. **Dance To This** - Troye Sivan ft. Ariana Grande
9. **Rebel** - RuPaul

10. **Glitter** - BENEE
11. **Electric Love (Oliver Remix)** - BØRNS
12. **Karma** - Mike Taveira
13. **Peter** - Taylor Swift
14. **i don't wanna talk about love** - Michael Medrano
15. **I Know A Place** - MUNA
16. **Bloom** - Troye Sivan
17. **11 Blocks** - Wrabel
18. **Wallflower** - mxmtoon
19. **Apocalypse** - Cigarettes After Sex
20. **All My Friends Hate Me** - Jude York

1

BOOKISH BOY

The leather armchairs at Dapple & Mays still bore the indentations of yesterday's readers, their worn surfaces telling stories of countless literary escapes. Jesse Valentine pulled into the empty parking lot at exactly 6:45 AM, catching his reflection in the darkened store windows. His dirty blonde hair was indeed getting a bit long, the slight curl at his nape definitely past what Ezekiel would call "professional." At 27 - 28 tomorrow, he reminded himself - Jesse's boyish features still made him look younger than his years. High cheekbones, green eyes that his mother once called "cat-like," and dimples that appeared with every smile. His lean frame, maintained by yoga and Pilates rather than Ezekiel's intensive gym routine, looked slim but strong in his favorite sweater.

The key stuck in the lock like it always did. He jiggled it twice, pushed his hip against the heavy glass door, and stepped into the familiar darkness. The scent of books – paper, ink, and binding glue – mingled with fresh coffee and the lingering traces of lemon furniture polish. Jesse flicked on the lights, watching as they hummed to life row by row, illuminating

towers of new releases and staff picks.

His phone buzzed before he could even set down his bag.

Ezekiel: *Morning babe. Don't forget to get that haircut today. I made an appointment at Andre's for 2pm. Also, the blue suit needs to be picked up from the cleaners.*

Jesse sighed, typing back a quick "Ok" before dropping his messenger bag behind the counter. His fingers traced the spine of his manuscript—-draft number God-knows-what of '*Secret Keeper'*—-tucked safely inside. The pages were dog-eared and coffee-stained, marked with late-night revisions and margin notes questioning whether Marcus would ever be brave enough to choose Jason. Just like every morning, he'd woken at 4 AM to write before work, trying to find the right ending for two boys who deserved their own happiness.

The café's espresso machine gurgled to life as Maria arrived, her dark curls freshly streaked with purple this week. "Morning, boss man. Ready for the big dinner tomorrow night?"

"Is it that obvious?" Jesse laughed as he accepted his vanilla latte, complete with Maria's signature foam heart.

He pulled out his manuscript, the pages wrinkled from being carried everywhere, certain scenes rewritten so many times the paper had gone soft. Marcus and Jason's story had started as a way to process his past, but somewhere along the way, they'd become more—they'd become his truth, even if he wasn't ready to admit it.

His laptop was already open to the latest chapter, where Marcus stood watching Jason climb out of the pool, his heart racing with words he couldn't say. The cursor blinked accusingly at the end of an unfinished sentence—the same one

he'd been stuck on for weeks.

His phone buzzed again.

Ezekiel: *And please stick to black coffee today. All that sugar isn't good for you.*

Jesse took a deliberately long sip of his sugary drink. "Well, that's text number two and it's not even 7 AM."

"Please." Maria rolled her eyes. "Ezekiel's been planning this for weeks. Wayne in Biography caught him Googling 'most romantic restaurants in Detroit' on his lunch break last month."

"Of course he did. God forbid anything isn't perfectly scheduled and planned out." Jesse took another defiant sip of his latte, avoiding Maria's knowing look. "I mean, I love that about him. His… stability."

"Sounds thrilling," Maria said dryly. "Nothing says true love like stability."

"He's good to me," Jesse protested, even as his phone buzzed again. "He's successful, gorgeous, and he actually wants to build a life with me. Do you know how rare that is?"

Ezekiel: *Just checked the weather for tomorrow. Wear that wool coat I got you, not your denim jacket. We want to look appropriate for Vincenzo's.*

Maria peered at the text and made a gagging sound. "I know you deserve someone who makes your heart race, not just your daily schedule."

Before Jesse could answer, Maria called him over to the community board.

"Oh! I meant to tell you! Look what just came in for the

Young Artists showcase next month." She pointed to a striking piece: two knights removing their helmets, the space between them filled with stars. "The artist is only nine, but look at the emotion he captured."

Jesse leaned closer to read the small card: "Parker D., Age 9."

"His mom dropped it off this morning," Maria continued. "Seemed annoyed about the whole thing, actually. Kept saying he needs to draw 'normal' subjects, but the kid was adamant about entering this piece specifically."

Jesse nodded absently, his attention caught by how the knights' hands reached for each other like they couldn't help themselves, like gravity pulling stars together.

Diane from Children's Literature bustled in, her arms full of fall-themed picture books. The retired English teacher knew every customer's reading preferences, their children's names, their pets' birthdays. She made everyone feel like they were walking into their own private library.

"Morning, loves! Jesse, that window display needs your magic touch. Everything I try looks like a tornado hit a pumpkin patch."

"I got it, Di." Jesse welcomed the distraction, heading to the front window where Wayne was already struggling with a stepladder.

As Jesse made his way to help with the window display, another piece of student artwork on the community board caught his eye. A dragon wrapped protectively around two princes, signed "P.D." The artist's statement read: "Sometimes the scariest monsters aren't dragons, but the fear that keeps us from being ourselves."

Jesse paused, struck by the wisdom in those words. The same technique used in the piece Maria had showed him.

That kid's got talent, Jessie thought as he continued walking. Just like his own characters, this 'Parker' seemed to understand that the most powerful stories came from truth, even when that truth was painful. Jesse had filled three notebooks trying to capture that same raw honesty in Marcus and Jason's story.

Jesse turned around and looked at the dragon artwork, a strange tightness forming in his chest. He shook it off and continued to the front window, where Wayne was precariously balancing on the stepladder.

A mother and daughter browsed the fiction section, heads bent together over a shared book. The girl couldn't have been more than thirteen—about Kevin's age when Jesse had left home. The mother's laugh floated across the store, soft and achingly familiar.

The memory hit without warning:

Ezekiel's voice on the phone, gentle but urgent. "Jesse, you need to come home. Now."

He'd known from Ezekiel's tone—something was wrong. The drive from the bookstore had been a blur, his hands shaking on the steering wheel.

Ezekiel had been waiting outside their apartment, his usually perfect suit wrinkled from rushing home from work. One look at his face, and Jesse knew.

"Your brother Noah called the firm," Ezekiel had said softly. "The cancer... it spread faster than they thought. Your mother... Jesse, I'm so sorry."

The world had tilted sideways. Jesse remembered his knees giving out, remembered Ezekiel catching him before he hit the ground.

"When?" The word had barely made it past his throat.

"An hour ago. At the hospital." Ezekiel's arms had been steady

around him, anchoring him as everything else spun out of control. "Noah wanted you to know. He said... he said she asked for you, near the end."

Jesse had shattered then, completely and utterly. Through the haze of grief, he remembered Ezekiel half-carrying him inside, remembered strong hands guiding him to the couch, remembered a warm body holding him as he broke apart.

Hours had passed like that. Ezekiel never let go, even when Jesse's sobs turned to screams of rage, even when grief gave way to panic attacks that left him gasping for air.

"I never got to say goodbye," Jesse had choked out sometime in the dark hours of morning. "She died thinking I hated her."

"No." Ezekiel's voice had been firm but gentle. "Noah said she understood. Said she wanted you to know that."

When Jesse had finally fallen into exhausted sleep, he'd woken to find Ezekiel still there, still holding him. The coffee table was covered in papers—he'd spent the night making calls, arranging for Jesse to have time off work, even looking into ways Jesse might be able to attend the funeral from a distance since his father had made it clear he wasn't welcome.

"Nikki's on the first flight from New York," Ezekiel said softly, brushing Jesse's hair back from his face. "She'll be here in a few hours."

Something in Jesse's chest loosened slightly at the mention of his best friend. Nikki, who'd driven him to the hospital the night Anson broke his jaw. Nikki, who'd given him a home when his family threw him out. Nikki, who'd never once left his side.

"You didn't have to do all this," Jesse had whispered.

"Yes, I did." Ezekiel had pressed a kiss to his temple. "You're not alone anymore, Jesse. Let me take care of you."

And Jesse had. Because sometimes safety felt like salvation when you'd spent so long drowning in grief.

The memory faded as Wayne called his name. "Earth to Jesse? These pumpkins aren't going to arrange themselves."

Jesse blinked, forcing himself back to the present. The mother and daughter were gone, but their laughter seemed to linger in the air like a bittersweet reminder.

"Sorry," he said, moving to help Wayne with the display. "Got lost in thought."

His phone buzzed:

Ezekiel: *Remember to stand up straight when you're doing the display. Your posture gets sloppy when you're arranging books.*

"I swear to *God*," Jesse muttered, shoving the phone in his back pocket.

He spent the next hour arranging books and artificial leaves, letting his mind drift. Tomorrow night, Ezekiel would propose at Vincenzo's. He'd probably have the ring nestled in a champagne glass, or hidden under a silver dome—something classic and elegant, just like him. Just like the hanging plants he'd suggested for the store, citing studies about retail productivity while Jesse had agreed simply because they made the place feel more magical. That was their relationship in a nutshell: Ezekiel's practicality meeting Jesse's whimsy somewhere in the middle.

The bookstore's small TV played quietly in the corner, Darcy Quinn's voice carrying across the shelves: "Coming up: How one couple's viral moment changed hearts and minds across America…"

"They're doing a series on love stories that change the world,"

Maria said, wiping down the counter. "Last week it was that banker who came out during his firm's annual meeting. God, everything's about viral moments these days. Remember when love stories could just be private?"

Jesse's stomach tightened. A banker living his truth on camera. Why did that feel so personal?

"Some stories deserve to be shared," Diane called from Children's Literature. "Like yours and Ezekiel's, Jesse. That's the kind of thing Darcy Quinn lives for."

The thought of his and Ezekiel's perfectly planned life broadcast to millions made Jesse's palms sweat. Some stories weren't meant for public consumption. Some truths were too perfectly dull for prime time.

"Jesse laughed, "Our lives are too boring for Darcy Quinn. She likes danger…"

"Some stories deserve to be shared," Diane said, her eyes knowing. "The ones that help other people find their courage. You know my niece found her wife after seeing a couple just like her on Darcy's show?"

"You know," Maria added, refilling the sugar dispensers, "our friend Nikki - the one who moved to New York to act? She does clerical work at Darcy's offices between shows. Says the behind-the-scenes energy is incredible when they find couples with real stories to tell."

Jesse's attention was drawn to the TV again. Darcy Quinn's perfectly coiffed blonde hair and megawatt smile filled the screen as she introduced her next segment.

"Two years ago, Ava Darman and Mia Rodriguez made headlines when their impromptu kiss at a protest went viral. Today, we catch up with the couple who accidentally became the face of a movement."

The screen cut to footage of two women, hands clasped tightly as they faced down a line of riot police. In a moment of defiance—or perhaps desperation—they turned to each other and shared a passionate kiss. The image had been splashed across social media, newspapers, and magazines for weeks.

Jesse felt a familiar tightening in his chest. He remembered seeing that photo for the first time, the raw emotion captured in that single frame. The way Ava's fingers tangled in Mia's hair, how their bodies seemed to melt into each other despite the chaos surrounding them. It was a moment of pure, unapologetic love—the kind that made your heart race and your palms sweat.

Jesse's gaze drifted to his own reflection in the store window, superimposed over the autumn display he'd just finished. He looked… put together. Neat. Professional. Just as Ezekiel always wanted him to be.

"I interviewed them last year," Darcy Quinn was saying on the screen. "The chemistry between them was electric. You could feel it even through the camera."

Maria snorted. "As if Darcy Quinn knows anything about real chemistry. Though I guess she knew enough to spot those two," she added, nodding at the screen where Ava and Mia were still lost in each other. "Sometimes true love is impossible to fake."

But Jesse wasn't listening. His mind was replaying moments with Ezekiel—their first date at that overpriced sushi restaurant, weekend brunches with Ezekiel's law firm colleagues, nights spent watching documentaries because Ezekiel insisted they were more intellectually stimulating than Jesse's beloved rom-coms or Pixar tear-jerkers. Each memory was pleasant, comfortable… but where was the spark? Where was that heart-

racing, palm-sweating feeling he'd seen captured in that viral photo?

Jesse's phone buzzed again. He ignored it, his eyes fixed on the TV as Darcy Quinn introduced Ava and Mia. They sat close together on a plush couch, fingers intertwined. Ava, with her cropped blonde hair and sharp jawline, exuded a quiet confidence. Mia, softer around the edges with long curls and warm brown eyes, seemed to glow from within.

Jesse watched Ava trace Mia's knuckles as they spoke, an unconscious gesture of intimacy that made his chest ache. When was the last time he'd touched Ezekiel without thinking about proper public behavior?

Jesse thought about his manuscript, about Marcus and Jason's messy, passionate love affair. He wrote what he couldn't live - real love, dangerous love, the kind that made headlines and changed lives.

"Did you see this one?" Maria held up her phone, showing another viral proposal video. "Two women at Disney World last week. Three million views already."

Jesse watched the carefully choreographed moment - the flash mob, the perfectly timed music, the ring hidden in a glass slipper. Everything calculated for maximum social media impact.

"When did love become a performance art?" he wondered aloud.

"Since likes started paying the bills," Maria said dryly. "Jaime's sister got a sponsorship deal just from posting her engagement photos. The right hashtags can change your life these days."

The morning rush kept them busy until just before lunch. A teenage boy requested help to find books about swimming,

and Jesse's heart skipped as he led him to the sports section. The chlorine-scented memory hit without warning: Anson Donovan cutting through water like a knife, all predatory grace and raw power. Jesse had spent countless hours in those bleachers, pretending to study while watching Anson's muscled form slice through lap after lap. Back when Anson was the star athlete who tormented him in the halls but devoured him in empty locker rooms, leaving marks that Jesse had to hide with high collars…

His phone buzzed, shattering the memory.

Ezekiel*: Just heard from the restaurant. Confirmed our exact seating location. I requested the table furthest from the kitchen. Less foot traffic = more romantic. Don't be late tomorrow.*

Jesse's fingers tightened around his phone. Another message followed immediately:

Ezekiel*: Also, I noticed you've been using that ratty messenger bag again. Use the leather briefcase I bought you. First impressions matter.*

Just before lunch, a woman and her teenage son wandered in. The boy caught Jesse's attention immediately—slight build, fingers nervously playing with his sleeve cuffs, eyes lighting up at the sight of all the books. Jesse remembered that look in his own mirror at fourteen.

"Can I help you find anything?" Jesse approached them carefully, grateful for the distraction from his buzzing phone.

"My son needs something for his book report," the mother said. "Something appropriate." Her emphasis on the last word

made Jesse's chest tighten.

After his mother reluctantly headed to the café, Jesse led the boy to the YA section. "You know," he said quietly, "I just got in this great fantasy romance about two princes. It's shelved under 'Fantasy' if anyone asks, but it might be exactly what you're looking for."

His phone vibrated again.

Ezekiel: *Don't forget the haircut at 2. I've already paid Andre to take it shorter than usual. More polished*.

Jesse shoved the phone deeper into his pocket, focusing on the nervous teenager before him. "When I was your age, I used to pretend I was looking for science fiction while secretly reading romance novels. Now I run the romance section book club. Funny how things work out, right?"

By late afternoon, Jesse's phone felt like a burning coal in his pocket. Ezekiel's texts had covered everything from Jesse's posture to his choice of socks for tomorrow night. Each message chipped away at his patience until he finally silenced the phone completely, earning an approving nod from Maria.

Through the store windows, Jesse watched his writing group beginning to arrive. Mrs. Chen first, always early, her historical romance manuscript practically spilling red pen marks as she hurried through the light rain. Brad slouching behind her, his sci-fi epic tucked safely in his waterproof backpack. Robbie's car pulling up, David in the passenger seat looking smaller than usual.

These were his people. The ones who understood that sometimes the most important stories were the ones you were afraid to tell.

Jesse's fingers found his manuscript in his messenger bag—the ratty one Ezekiel kept trying to replace. The pages felt soft from endless revisions, coffee-stained and dog-eared and real. Tonight he'd have to read the pool scene, the one where Marcus finally admits why he spends every afternoon in those bleachers, pretending to study while watching Jason cut through water like destiny.

His chest tightened. Tomorrow night at Vincenzo's loomed like a perfectly planned shadow, but right now, in this worn leather armchair circle, with these people who wrote their hearts into margins and between lines—right now he could be honest.

Even if only on paper.

Even if only through Marcus and Jason's story.

"Ready?" Maria asked softly, already setting out their usual drinks. She'd made his latte extra sweet, like she knew he needed the courage.

Jesse nodded, watching his writers find their seats, all of them carrying stories they were afraid to tell but brave enough to write.

Some truths, he thought, demand to be told—even when you're not ready to face them yourself.

2

SECRET BOY

The evening writing group filed in just as Jesse finished straightening the circle of leather armchairs. Mrs. Chen arrived first, clutching her manuscript with red pen marks blooming across the pages like roses. She'd been working on her historical romance for three years, each draft getting closer to the truth she was afraid to tell.

"I changed the ending again," she announced, settling into her usual chair. "My daughter says it's too *risky*, but…" She looked at Jesse with determined eyes. "Sometimes love has to be brave, yes?"

Brad slouched in next, his sci-fi epic tucked under one arm. "If my space lesbians don't end up together this time, I'm blaming you, Valentine. Your last critique got me thinking maybe I've been playing it too safe."

"Heaven forbid," Jesse laughed, but his heart warmed. Brad's story had started as a typical space opera until Jesse had gently suggested that maybe his alien warrior women were more than just friends.

Maria emerged from behind the café counter, her notebook

covered in coffee rings and purple ink to match her hair. "If we're sharing revised endings, wait until you hear what I did to my latest poem." She dropped into her usual chair, close enough to keep refilling everyone's cups but far enough to see all their faces. "Turns out angry verses about finding your voice hit harder than pretty ones about keeping quiet."

She'd started writing poetry six months ago, after a customer had dismissed her as "just a barista." Her first poems had been safe, pretty things about coffee and customers. But lately, they'd grown teeth.

The room grew quiet when Robbie and David slipped in, hands clasped tightly. David's eyes were red-rimmed again, and Jesse's chest tightened at the familiar pain in their posture.

"Before we start," Maria announced, already up and moving to her coffee station, "David needs his usual - hot chocolate with extra whipped cream and those chocolate sprinkles that make Ezekiel cringe about dental health." She prepared the drink with practiced care, adding an extra swirl of cream. "Better to drown sorrows in sugar than tears, right?"

David managed a weak smile as she handed him the mug. This was their ritual - Maria's special hot chocolate as emotional armor before sharing hard truths.

"His parents again?" Jesse asked softly as Robbie helped David into a chair.

Robbie nodded, his protective arm never leaving David's shoulders. "They found his college applications. All art schools." His jaw clenched. "Said they won't pay for him to 'waste his life drawing fairy stories.'"

Jesse remembered similar words from his own father: No son of mine is going to waste his life writing about faggot love stories.

"Show me what you're working on," Jesse said instead of voicing the memory. David pulled out his sketchbook, opening to a series of illustrations - two knights removing their helmets, stars spilling between them like secrets.

"It's for a graphic novel," David whispered. "About two warriors who have to choose between duty and love."

D*on't we all?* Jesse thought, but he just squeezed David's shoulder and said, "It's beautiful. Truth always is."

Mrs. Chen leaned forward, her pages rustling. "Speaking of truth, Jesse - you promised to share more of Marcus and Jason's story this week."

"Did I?" Jesse tried to sound casual, but his hand instinctively went to his messenger bag where his latest draft waited.

"Don't hold out on us," Brad called from his corner. "Some of us are living vicariously through your chlorine-scented romance."

Jesse pulled out the manuscript, dog-eared and coffee-stained. "It's still rough," he warned, but they were already leaning forward eagerly.

He read the latest scene - Marcus watching Jason climb out of the pool, remembering their first kiss, struggling with the weight of choices not yet made. His voice shook slightly on the lines about how some loves burn too hot to survive, but some burns leave scars that never fade.

When he finished, the room was silent.

"That's not how it really ends, is it?" David asked, his own pain forgotten in concern for fictional lovers. "They have to end up together."

"I don't know yet," Jesse admitted. "I'm still trying to figure out if Marcus is brave enough to choose what he wants over what everyone expects him to want."

"Like me with my warriors," Brad nodded. "Though mine have laser swords, which makes decisions easier."

"Like my empress," Mrs. Chen added softly. "Everyone says she should choose the safe match, the proper prince. But her heart wants the stable boy who reads her poetry under cherry blossoms."

Jesse met her knowing eyes. They all knew these weren't just stories they were writing.

"Maybe," Robbie said, his arm tightening around David, "the bravest choice is being honest about who you love, even when the world tells you it's wrong."

"Maybe," Jesse echoed, thinking of Ezekiel waiting at home with his perfectly planned life. "But sometimes the hardest person to be honest with is yourself."

A heavy silence descended upon the room as each person retreated into their own personal thoughts and memories.

"Read us your new ending, Maria," Jesse encouraged. "The one about breaking silence."

Maria stood, her purple hair catching the light like a crown. Her voice, usually warm with coffee orders and gentle teasing, took on a different edge:

"They said 'just a barista'
Like my worth could be measured
In cups and coins
Like my dreams were meant to be
Filtered and pressed
Into something more palatable
Something less…"

Her words filled the space, fierce and unapologetic, verses

about shattering expectations and finding freedom making David sit up straighter, making Mrs. Chen nod in understanding. She wrote about voices rising from behind counters, about art blooming in unexpected places, about being more than other people's assumptions.

When she finished, Brad let out a low whistle. "Damn, barista-poet. No wonder Jesse lets you critique his love scenes."

"Someone has to tell him when he's being too careful with his words," Maria shot back with a knowing look at Jesse. "Some stories need to burn on the page, not just simmer." She settled back into her chair, pulling out her red pen. "Speaking of which, that pool scene? Marcus needs to do more than just watch Jason climb out. Let him want. Let him burn. Let him taste chlorine and regret on his tongue."

"Maria!" Mrs. Chen pretended to be scandalized, but her eyes sparkled.

"What? We're all adults here. Well, mostly." She winked at David, who was still clutching his hot chocolate. "And some stories deserve to be told without filters. Speaking of which… " She turned back to Jesse, her expression growing serious. "When are you going to let Marcus tell Jason the truth? About why he really spends every afternoon watching swim practice?"

"I'm still working on that part," Jesse admitted, not meeting her eyes.

"Aren't we all," Maria murmured, her gaze knowing. The words triggered a memory -

Summer morning sun streaming through Nikki's bedroom window, Jesse climbing through it at 8 AM, his hair still damp from a hasty shower, wearing yesterday's clothes and the biggest smile they'd ever seen.

"Oh my god," sixteen-year-old Maria had whispered, sitting up in her sleeping bag. "You did it. You actually did it."

"Spill. Everything. Now." Nikki had pulled him onto her bed, both girls leaning in close. "Room 112, right? Just like you planned?"

Jesse had touched his lips, still swollen from Anson's kisses. "It was... perfect. Not perfect like planned perfect. Perfect like... messy and real and...I'll never forget it." He'd blushed deeply. "He kept calling me 'Pretty Boy' and touching my face like he couldn't believe I was real."

"Details!" Nikki had demanded while Maria threw a pillow at her.

"Not those kinds of details! But... okay, maybe some details." Jesse had flopped back on Nikki's bed, staring at her glow-in-the-dark stars.

"He has this spot on his chest, right over his heart, where his skin is really soft. And he likes it when you play with his hair. And afterward, he held me so tight, like he was afraid I'd disappear."

"Was he gentle?" Maria asked softly. "Because I swear to god, if he hurt you—"

"No!" Jesse sat up quickly. "No, he was... god, you guys, he was so different from how he acts at school. Like, you know how he's all swagger and attitude in the halls?"

"You mean when he's pretending he doesn't watch you in the library?" Nikki smirked.

"Yeah, well," Jesse's whole face softened. "Last night he kept asking if I was okay, if he was going too fast. He kissed every inch of my face and kept whispering how beautiful I am."

"Did you do that thing with the poetry?" Maria asked. "The one you've been practicing?"

Jesse's blush deepened. "I recited that verse about drowning in starlight while he was kissing my neck and he just... stopped. Stared

at me like I'd given him the whole world."

"And then?" Nikki prodded.

"And then he said no one's ever made him feel like this before. That he's never wanted anyone the way he wants me." Jesse touched a spot on his collarbone, hidden by his shirt. "He marked me. Said he needed everyone to know I was his, even if he's the only one who knows where to look."

"Did he say it?" Maria had asked softly. "The L word?"

Jesse's smile had turned secret, precious. "He wrote it. On my skin. With his fingertip. Over and over."

"God," Nikki had sighed dreamily. "This is better than any play I've ever been in."

"But what about swim team?" Maria asked. "Turner and those guys? They're always giving you shit."

Jesse's smile dimmed slightly. "Anson says he'll handle it. Says he'll make sure they leave me alone without... you know. Without anyone knowing why."

"More secrets," Nikki muttered.

"He's not ready," Jesse defended quickly. "His dad... you don't know what his dad's like. Just... please understand. This has to stay between us."

"When do you have to go home?" Maria asked, always the practical one.

"Mom's picking me up at 9. Thinks I spent the night here." He touched his neck again, smiling. "He wants to see me again tonight. Says he can't wait until tomorrow."

"You're in so deep," Nikki said softly.

"I know," Jesse whispered. "I don't care. He's worth it. He's worth everything."

Maria and Nikki had exchanged that look - one that held worry about secrets and closets and hearts not ready to be brave. But they'd

promised, because that's what best friends did.

Now, watching Jesse stare at his manuscript about Marcus and Jason, Maria remembered that summer morning - remembered the way love had made him glow, remembered how that glow had dimmed with each passing month of hiding, remembered how it had finally shattered in a school parking lot on prom night.

"Some stories need to burn on the page," she repeated softly, but this time she wasn't talking about poetry.

They worked until closing, sharing pages and fears and hopes. Mrs. Chen finally let her empress choose the stable boy. Brad's space lesbians got their happy ending. David sketched more panels of his knights choosing love over duty.

Jesse stayed late, revising Marcus and Jason's story under the dim bookstore lights while Maria closed up the cafe. Every word felt like a confession, every scene a truth he wasn't ready to face.

The cursor blinked accusingly at the end of an unfinished sentence.

Some stories, it seemed, wrote themselves. Even when you weren't ready for the ending.

When he finally checked his phone again, six messages waited:

E**zekiel***: Did you get the haircut?*

Ezekiel: *The dry cleaner closes at 6.*

Ezekiel: *Please tell me you're not wearing that green sweater I hate to the writing group.*

Ezekiel: *I laid out tomorrow's outfit on your bed. Ezekiel: Don't forget to trim your nails.*

Ezekiel: *Called Andre. He said you never showed. Jesse, we* ***talked*** *about this.*

Jesse's fingers trembled as he typed: *Been busy with customers. Store first, remember?*

The response was immediate:

Ezekiel: *Your appearance reflects on both of us. I just want you to look your best.*

"I need coffee," Jesse announced to no one in particular, heading for Maria's counter. "Something with extra sugar."

"And extra whipped cream," Maria added, already preparing his drink. "Because *some* of us believe in joy."

As the writing group wrapped up, Jesse watched his writers leave, their notebooks clutched to their chests, their stories waiting to be told. His phone buzzed one final time:

Ezekiel: *Taking my car tomorrow since it's nicer. Don't want to show up to Vincenzo's in your Civic. I'll drive us both so you can have a drink. See you at home soon, babe. Left dinner in the microwave - that healthy meal prep from Sunday.*

Maria appeared at his elbow, already shrugging on her jacket. "You coming?"

"Yeah," Jesse said, staring at the message. "Just lost in thought."

"About tomorrow?"

"About *everything*."

She squeezed his arm. "It's okay to want more than just stability, you know. It's okay to want passion."

Jesse nodded, the word 'passion' conjuring unbidden images of chlorine-scented kisses and forbidden touches. Of Anson's reckless smile and calloused hands. Of everything Ezekiel wasn't.

As he reached his car, his phone lit up with Nikki's face – a silly selfie from her

last visit. His first real smile of the day spread across his face as he answered.

"There's my favorite almost-birthday boy!" Her voice carried the busy sounds of New York in the background. "I wanted to call before my show tomorrow. I can't believe you're going to be twenty-eight!"

"God, don't remind me." Jesse leaned against his car, tension melting from his shoulders just hearing her voice. "How's the new production?"

"It's amazing, but *don't* change the subject." She paused, and he could hear her walking. "You know, I was doing some clerical work for The Darcy Quinn Show last week - just filing and answering phones until my next audition - and this woman came in talking about how important it is to follow your authentic path. Made me think of you. You sound off. What's wrong?"

Jesse closed his eyes. Only Nikki could read him this well, even through a phone call. "Ezekiel's taking me to Vincenzo's tomorrow night."

"Ah." A pause. "The fancy Italian place? He's going to propose, isn't he?"

"It's so obvious it hurts."

"And you don't sound excited." Another pause. "Jesse… did something happen? You're not… you haven't seen him, have you? Laurie Preston says that her brother has seen him out and about at Narcotics Anonymous meetings."

She didn't need to say Anson's name. "No," Jesse said too quickly. "No, I just… I helped this kid find a book about swimming today and suddenly I was back there, you know? In those bleachers, watching him in the pool, thinking I could actually fix him if I just loved him enough…and tell Laurie Preston that those meets are called 'anonymous' for a reason."

"Oh, honey." The sympathy in her voice nearly broke him. "Have you told Ezekiel about him yet?"

"What's there to tell? That my first love broke my jaw and called me a faggot at prom? That's not exactly a romantic dinner conversation."

"Jesse—"

"I should go. Ezekiel's waiting with his perfectly meal-prepped dinner and tomorrow's perfectly pressed suit."

"Call me after tomorrow? No matter *what* you decide?"

"Promise. Break a leg at your show."

"Love you, bookworm."

"Love you too, drama queen."

The call ended with a click, leaving Jesse alone with his thoughts and fears.

N*o matter what you decide,* she had said.

He knew he would say "yes" to the man who wanted to give him everything he thought he should want.

Jesse sat in his car for a long moment, remembering how Nikki had been the one to drive him to the hospital that prom night, how she'd helped him craft the lie about falling down

the stairs. She was the only one who knew the whole truth about Anson Donovan.

Some questions were too big for tonight, too tangled to unravel in the quiet of a closing bookstore. Besides, tomorrow would be here soon enough, with all its perfectly planned romance and life-changing decisions. For now, he had his manuscript waiting in his bag, full of characters who still had time to choose their own endings.

He started his car and headed home, where Ezekiel would be waiting with his scheduled life and his pressed suits and his plans that never included space for ghosts from the past or the mess of real passion. Tomorrow loomed like a promise he wasn't sure he wanted to keep.

3

BIRTHDAY BOY

Jesse stood in front of the bathroom mirror, his reflection blurred by steam from the shower. His 28th birthday had dawned clear and crisp, a perfect October morning. Ezekiel was just about to leave for work, but not before laying out Jesse's clothes and leaving a sticky note on the mirror:

Happy Birthday, babe! Don't forget haircut - 2PM. Want you looking perfect for Vincenzo's tonight.

As he wiped the condensation away, his mind drifted to another time – the smudged glass in the back corner of Silver Hills High School library, where he used to check his reflection to make sure the bullies hadn't left any visible marks. It was sophomore year, and the library had become his sanctuary during sixth period independent study. Mrs. Williams, his study hall teacher, had noticed how Turner and his friends would trip him, steal his papers, whisper "fairy" just loud enough for him to hear. She'd written him a permanent pass to the library, her kind eyes saying everything her words couldn't.

That's where he first really saw Anson Donovan. Not as the laughing boy who sometimes joined in when others shoved Jesse into lockers, but as something else entirely. Anson had been caught smoking in the second-floor bathroom – again – and his punishment was "volunteering" in the library. Jesse remembered the way he'd slouched against the returns cart, leather jacket creasing at the shoulders, dark hair falling into eyes that held more intelligence than his grades suggested.

Most days it was just the two of them. Mrs. Grey, the elderly librarian, would disappear into the stacks, leaving Anson to reshelf books while Jesse pretended to study. At first, they ignored each other. Then one day, Jesse couldn't reach the copy of "The Great Gatsby" he needed for English class.

"Need a hand, Pretty Boy?"

Jesse had startled at Anson's voice behind him. He turned to find Anson closer than expected, those six feet of lean muscle and attitude making Jesse's throat go dry. Without waiting for an answer, Anson reached up, easily plucking the book from the top shelf. Instead of just handing it over, he held it just out of reach.

"Didn't figure you for the Gatsby type," Anson said, that signature smirk playing at his lips. "Though I guess you would be into all that romantic crap."

The nickname had stuck after that – Pretty Boy – dragging out the syllables like he was tasting them.

It should have sounded mocking, but something in Anson's voice made Jesse's skin tingle every time he said it.

The library became their country. Their private territory, claimed without ceremony, maintained without acknowledgment — two boys who never spoke in the halls, who existed in entirely separate universes between the hours of seven and three, and who were, in

the amber-lit quiet of the school library after the last bell, completely and helplessly themselves.

It started slowly, the way all the most irreversible things do.

Anson would find reasons to shelve books in whatever aisle Jesse had settled in. Jesse would find reasons to need books from the highest shelves. Mrs. Grey, bless her, was approximately a thousand years old and had the spatial awareness of a sleeping cat. She would disappear into the back stacks for thirty, forty minutes at a stretch, and they both knew it, and neither of them said so, and the knowing sat between them like a lit match.

The first time Anson kissed him, they were in the poetry section.

Jesse had been reaching for a Neruda collection — legitimately, genuinely, for a paper he was actually writing — when Anson appeared at his shoulder and said, "You're such a cliché, Pretty Boy," and Jesse had turned to argue and found Anson's face six inches from his, closer than strictly necessary, closer than accidentally, and the argument had died somewhere between his brain and his mouth and Anson had closed the remaining distance with the careful deliberateness of someone who had been thinking about doing exactly this for longer than they intended to admit.

It lasted four seconds. Maybe five. Anson pulled back first, and his expression was complicated — that particular Anson expression that Jesse would spend years learning to translate, equal parts want and terror and defiance, like a man standing at the edge of something and refusing to look down.

"There," Anson said, like he'd settled an argument.

"There," Jesse agreed, because his vocabulary had temporarily abandoned him.

After that, the library became a different kind of place.

They developed a system without discussing it — because they never discussed anything directly, because directness cost too much,

because the whole arrangement existed in the soft silent agreement of two boys who needed something they couldn't name. Jesse would arrive first, claim a back aisle, the one behind Reference & Periodicals where Mrs. Grey almost never ventured. Anson would check in at the desk, take his reshelfing cart, and make his way there by a route so indirect it would have looked, to any observer, entirely coincidental.

Jesse learned the sound of Anson's cart wheels on the linoleum. The particular squeak of the third wheel, the slightly uneven rhythm of it. He could pick it out from anywhere in the building, and every time he heard it something in his chest would lift the way a dog's ears lift at a familiar footstep.

They kissed in Biography. They kissed in World History, wedged between the encyclopedia volumes no one had touched since 1987. They kissed in the oversized-books section with a copy of National Geographic's Greatest Photographs open across their laps as cover, not that anyone was checking. Once, memorably, they kissed standing up against the shelving unit in True Crime while Mrs. Grey's sensible shoes squeaked past on the other side, and Jesse had pressed his face into Anson's shoulder and shaken with silent laughter while Anson turned to stone above him, holding his breath, and when the footsteps receded Anson had exhaled in one long shuddering gust and said, "I am going to have a heart attack and die and it will be your fault," and Jesse had laughed so hard his knees gave slightly, and Anson had caught him, automatically, without looking, and held on longer than was strictly necessary once the crisis had passed.

That was the thing about Anson that Jesse never found a way to write correctly — not in the manuscript, not in the poems, not in any of the seventeen drafts he'd attempted. In the halls, Anson Donovan was performance: the easy swagger, the practiced smirk,

the careful cruelty of a boy who had learned early that armor was the only architecture that held. But in the library, in the amber quiet, with Mrs. Grey's sensible shoes safely on the other side of the Reference shelves — in there, he was something else entirely. He laughed too easily. He forgot to be cool. He would sometimes, mid-kiss, pull back just to look at Jesse's face, with an expression so unguarded it was almost painful to receive, like being looked at by a lamp, like being the thing the light was aimed at.

You're the only person I've ever met*, Anson said to him once, in the way that teenagers sometimes articulate enormous truths badly,* who makes me feel like I'm not lying all the time.

Jesse hadn't known what to do with that. He was seventeen and in love and had no framework for what it meant to be someone's reprieve. He just held onto it, the way he held onto everything Anson gave him in that library — cupped carefully in both hands, kept in the dark, never quite examined in full light for fear that examining it might make it stop being real.

He should have known that things kept in the dark eventually demand to be seen.

He just hadn't anticipated the particular form that reckoning would take.

Jesse wiped the steam from the mirror, his reflection blurring and sharpening like the memories he couldn't shake.

Prom night.

The way Anson had shown up late, reeking of whiskey and cigarette smoke, his eyes bloodshot.

Jesse had been giddy, nerves and excitement buzzing under his skin. For once, Anson had promised. Prom was supposed to be their night—a stolen moment just for them.

But then came the questions.

The sideways glances.

Anson pulling Jesse into the darkened parking lot.

The school parking lot was dark, lit only by the flicker of a broken streetlamp. The distant hum of prom music drifted through the air, a stark contrast to the tension crackling between them.

"Anson," Jesse said softly, his voice trembling, "what's wrong?"

Anson's grip on his arm tightened. Not enough to hurt, not yet, but enough to make Jesse's heart pound for all the wrong reasons. "People are looking at us," Anson hissed, his dark eyes darting toward the brightly lit gymnasium. "You're... you're smiling at me like that."

"Like what?" Jesse asked, his voice breaking. "Like I'm in love with you?"

Anson's jaw clenched. For a moment, Jesse thought he might smile, might laugh off the tension like he always did. But then his fist came out of nowhere, and Jesse's world shattered.

Pain exploded in his jaw, sharp and blinding. He stumbled backward, his hands flying to his face. The taste of blood filled his mouth, metallic and bitter, like the heartbreak that followed.

"I'm sorry," Anson muttered, his voice thick with something Jesse couldn't place. Fear? Shame? Love? "I didn't mean to—"

But Jesse didn't stay to hear the rest. He turned and ran, the sound of his own sobs drowning out everything else. The boy he loved was a stranger now, his touch no longer a comfort but a wound.

Later, in the ER, Jesse would lie about how it happened. He'd say he tripped, that he was clumsy. But as the doctor stitched him up, he'd close his eyes and think of Anson's hand reaching for him in the library, not to hurt, but to help. And he'd wonder how something that felt so right had gone so horribly, horribly wrong.

A knock on the bathroom door yanked Jesse back to the present.

"Are you almost ready?" Ezekiel called through the door. "I made you a birthday breakfast before I left. Don't forget to eat it. See you later, Jess. Happy Birthday!"

Jesse blinked, the memories dissipating like wisps of steam. "Thanks, babe," he called back.

He ran a hand through his damp hair, studying his reflection. The years had been kind to him – no visible scars from that night, though the internal ones still ached on days like this. At 28, he was finally comfortable in his own skin, the awkward, frightened boy from Silver Hills High School a distant echo.

He found a plate of his favorite avocado toast waiting on the counter, carefully arranged with the micro greens he loved. A sticky note in Ezekiel's precise handwriting: "You forget to eat when you're nervous. Don't skip breakfast today. Happy Birthday."

It was these moments - these small, thoughtful gestures - that made Jesse's heart ache. Ezekiel might plan everything to perfection, but he planned with Jesse's happiness in mind.

Jesse stared at his reflection in the window as he ate. At the perfectly pressed shirt Ezekiel had chosen for today. In a few hours, they'd be at Vincenzo's, Detroit's most exclusive Italian restaurant. Jesse knew exactly what would happen: the champagne would arrive, the ring would appear, and Ezekiel would execute his perfectly planned proposal.

Everything about it would be perfect. Controlled. Safe.

Nothing like those messy, stolen moments in the library. Jesse's heart would race every time Anson, breaking every rule about personal space, sprang up between the shelves, reaching around him for a book and whispering "Hey, Pretty Boy." Nothing like the danger and thrill of wanting something – someone – you couldn't have.

Jesse's Civic hummed to life, the engine's familiar rattle matching his unsettled thoughts. Ezekiel had been trying to convince him to trade it in for something "more professional" for months now. But Jesse loved this car – it had been his escape route at eighteen, when home became unbearable. It had seen him through college, through first dates, through heartbreak.

Through Anson.

The morning traffic crawled toward downtown Detroit, giving Jesse too much time to think. About proposals and promises. About perfectly planned futures versus messy, passionate pasts. About love that burned so bright it left scars.

There was a time when Jesse would've died for Anson Donovan… and Jesse knew in his heart that Anson would've done the same… as long as he was dead and no one could ever call him a 'faggot.' The thought came unbidden, bitter as coffee grounds, true as a bruise.

His jaw ached with phantom pain as he pulled into the Dapple & Mays parking lot. Ten years later, and some memories still felt fresh as yesterday. Some ghosts didn't care that it was your birthday, that your perfectly stable boyfriend was about to propose, that you were supposed to be happy.

The "CLOSED" sign was still up when Jesse pulled into his usual spot, which was strange. Maria's car was already there, along with Wayne's beat-up Subaru and Diane's pristine Volvo. His phone buzzed – probably another birthday text from Ezekiel with more instructions for tonight – but Jesse ignored it, frowning at the darkened storefront.

The key stuck in the lock like always. He pushed open the door, stepping into darkness.

"*SURPRISE*!"

The lights flicked on, revealing the café area transformed with streamers and balloons. Maria stood behind a chocolate cake adorned with entirely too many candles, her purple hair clashing gloriously with the pink "Happy Birthday" banner. Wayne, Diane, and even Mrs. Chen from the writing group clustered around her, beaming. Robbie and David peeked out from behind a tower of wrapped presents, their hands clasped together.

"You *guys*…" Jesse's voice caught in his throat.

"If *you* cry, *I'm* going to cry," Maria warned, but her own eyes were suspiciously bright. "And I just did this eyeliner, so don't you *dare*."

"Too late," Diane laughed, already dabbing at her eyes with a tissue.

David broke away from Robbie to hug Jesse fiercely. "Happy birthday! You have to open our present first."

"No way, mine first," Wayne protested. "I've been hiding it in Biography for weeks."

Jesse's vision blurred as he looked at them all – his chosen family, the people who loved him exactly as he was. No expectations, no required changes, no perfectly pressed shirts or scheduled haircuts. Just love, messy and real.

His phone buzzed again. This time he looked, expecting Ezekiel, but the name on the screen made his heart stop.

Noah Valentine: *Happy birthday, little brother.*

Ten years of silence, broken by three words. Jesse's hands shook as he stared at the message.

"Jesse?" Maria touched his arm. "What's wrong?"

"It's… it's my brother." He showed her the screen as another

message appeared.

Noah Valentine: *I miss you. I want to see you.*

The café suddenly felt too warm, too crowded. The last time he'd seen Noah was the day he left home, his brother's silence louder than their father's shouting.

Jesse typed quickly: *Thank you.*

Noah Valentine: *Please. We should talk.*

Jesse: *I don't think so.*

Another text lit up his screen, this one from

Nikki: *Just let me know if you need me to create a distraction tomorrow night. I didn't spend four years in theater school for nothing. Remember Tyler's almost-wedding? One dramatic fainting spell and the whole ceremony was delayed long enough for him to realize he was making a huge mistake.*

Jesse smiled despite himself, remembering how Nikki had dramatically swooned into a flower arrangement, giving Tyler the precious minutes he needed to call off his wedding to the wrong person. She had a flair for well-timed chaos that had saved more than one friend from making life-changing mistakes.

No dramatic interventions needed," he typed back. *"This isn't a play*.

Nikki: *Honey, everything's a play. Some of us are just better at recognizing when it's time to change the script.*

He turned off his phone, forcing a smile for his friends. "So, who's going to help me eat this ridiculous cake?"

"Oh no," Maria said firmly. "First you're going to open presents, then cake, then we're all going to be hopped up on sugar when we open the store an hour late. I already put a sign up explaining we're celebrating our favorite assistant manager."

As his friends pulled him toward the presents, Jesse felt the weight of Noah's messages like stones in his pocket. But here, surrounded by streamers and love and chocolate cake, he could almost believe in birthday wishes. Almost believe that some ghosts – whether they wore leather jackets or shared his blood – could stay in the past where they belonged.

Almost.

The sugar high from Maria's chocolate cake carried Jesse through the rest of his shift. By closing time, his desk was covered in birthday cards and small gifts from regular customers who'd seen the "Celebration!" sign in the window. He'd dodged most questions about the dinner with Ezekiel tonight, but word was spreading.

At home, Ezekiel had already laid out their clothes for dinner. "Reservations are at seven," he called as he dried off from his shower. "Plenty of time if we leave in twenty minutes."

Ezekiel emerged from the bathroom, water still beading on his shoulders, a towel wrapped low on his hips. At thirty-two, his dedication to early morning CrossFit sessions showed in every lean line of his body. Everything about him was perfectly maintained - from his carefully groomed stubble to his manicured nails to the faint scent of his expensive body

wash.

"The lighting will be perfect," he said, showing Jesse the table layout on his phone. His dark brown eyes lit up with enthusiasm as he scrolled through the images. "I've arranged for the sommelier to take a few discreet photos. For memories."

Jesse watched a droplet of water trail down Ezekiel's chest, following the path between his defined abs. Like everything else about him, even his physique was methodically crafted - the result of carefully tracked macros and a strict fitness routine. Jesse noticed Ezekiel's social media apps were already open in the background, hashtags researched and ready. But of course they were - everything about Ezekiel was perfectly planned, even the documentation of their special moments.

Jesse stared at his reflection as he dressed, remembering another nervous preparation three years ago – getting ready for Jaime's gallery opening. Worried his clothes weren't sophisticated enough, that he'd say the wrong thing about the art. He couldn't have known that night would change everything.

The memory carried him through the drive downtown, Ezekiel's Audi purring through the early evening traffic.

"You're quiet," Ezekiel said, his hands perfectly positioned at ten and two on the steering wheel, just like everything else in his life – measured, correct.

"Just thinking about how much has changed since we met." Jesse watched the familiar streets pass by. "Remember Jaime's gallery opening?"

Ezekiel smiled. "How could I forget? You wore that awful green cardigan."

"Hey! I loved that cardigan. Still do."

"You looked like a sexy librarian." Ezekiel reached over to

squeeze his hand. "Standing there, pretending to understand modern art."

"I understood it just fine," Jesse protested, but he was smiling too. "You were the one who kept asking why everything was blue."

"I was trying to get your attention." Ezekiel changed lanes smoothly. "Tom said you were single, but I couldn't believe it. This gorgeous guy, all alone, actually listening to Jaime's twenty-minute explanation of her 'artistic process.'"

Jesse remembered that night clearly – how nervous he'd been attending his first "serious" art show, how out of place he'd felt among Jaime's sophisticated crowd. Then Ezekiel had appeared, handsome in his tailored suit, asking thoughtful questions about books when he found out Jesse worked at a bookstore.

"You asked me out so formally," Jesse recalled. "'Would you do me the honor of having dinner with me next Friday?'"

"Well, I wanted to do it right." Ezekiel's thumb brushed over Jesse's knuckles. "No games, no confusion. Just a proper date."

It had been the first time anyone had asked Jesse out like that – no hookup apps, no drunk grinding at clubs, no desperate fumbling in back rooms or library stacks. Their first date had ended with a chaste kiss at Jesse's door. Their second date too. By the third date, Jesse had believed that maybe love could be something other than secret and destructive.

"And now look at us," Ezekiel said, sounding almost nervous for the first time since Jesse had known him. "Three years later…"

His voice trailed off as they pulled into Vincenzo's parking lot. Jesse's stomach fluttered with anticipation. He knew what was coming - had known for weeks. The perfectly planned

proposal at Detroit's most exclusive Italian restaurant, on his birthday no less. Everything about it was exactly like Ezekiel - careful, thoughtful, proper.

As they walked toward the restaurant entrance, Jesse tried to focus on the present moment - his birthday dinner, his boyfriend who loved him enough to plan every detail, his safe and steady future. But somewhere in the back of his mind, a voice that sounded like memory whispered that some loves weren't meant to be proper or planned at all.

Vincenzo's maître d' greeted them by name, leading them through the dimly lit dining room. Crystal glasses caught the light from ornate chandeliers, creating tiny prisms on crisp white tablecloths. The restaurant hummed with quiet conversation and the soft clink of expensive silverware.

Their table was tucked into a private corner, far from the kitchen, just as Ezekiel had requested. A bottle of champagne already waited in an ice bucket – Jesse's stomach tightened at the sight. Of course, Ezekiel would have arranged every detail in advance.

"Perfect, isn't it?" Ezekiel pulled out Jesse's chair. "I requested your favorite table."

"I didn't know I had a favorite table," Jesse said before he could stop himself.

"The one by the window, remember? From our six-month anniversary?" Ezekiel's smile was patient, like he was explaining something to a child. "You said you enjoyed watching the city lights."

Had he? Jesse couldn't remember. That night, like so many others with Ezekiel, felt pressed and preserved like flowers in a book – pretty, proper, and ultimately lifeless.

The waiter appeared with menus, but Ezekiel waved them

away. "I took the liberty of pre-ordering. I know how overwhelmed you get with too many choices."

Jesse reached for his water glass, needing something to do with his hands. The restaurant suddenly felt too warm, too closed in. Too perfect.

"First, a toast." Ezekiel nodded to the sommelier, who stepped forward to pour the champagne. "To my beautiful boyfriend on his birthday."

Jesse's glass trembled slightly as they clinked them together. He took a sip, waiting for the inevitable weight of metal against his tongue.

But the champagne was just champagne. Not yet, then. Maybe with dessert. Because of course Ezekiel would have planned the exact moment, the exact words, the exact future stretching out before them like a road already mapped.

As Ezekiel droned on about his mundane day at the bank, Jesse allowed himself to drift back in time to a special birthday memory.

It was his seventeenth year, and they had skipped school to spend the day together in Anson's bedroom while his parents were working. The room was a shrine to Anson's love for sports, with trophies proudly displayed on shelves and posters of his favorite teams plastered on the walls. But what Jesse cherished most was the scent - a mix of Anson's musky sweat and sweet cologne that seemed to linger on every surface. If those walls could talk, they would surely blush at the intimate moments shared between two young lovers that day, as they lay tangled up in sheets and lost in each other's embrace. Anson had disappeared briefly, only to return with a single cupcake topped with a single candle.

"Make a wish," Anson whispered with a mischievous grin.

Jesse closed his eyes and grinned. "*I wish we could stay here like this forever and* ever," he said before blowing out the candle.

Anson removed the candle and split the cupcake in half with his bare hands, feeding one portion to Jesse with his fingers. Jesse still remembered the sensation of licking the remaining icing off of Anson's fingers, a simple act of love that spoke volumes without words.

"Jesse? Are you listening?"

"Sorry," Jesse blinked back to the present. "Just… taking it all in."

Ezekiel reached across the table to squeeze his hand. "I know you're nervous about tonight. But trust me – everything's going to be perfect. You'll see."

The appetizer arrived – some kind of delicate cheese that probably cost more than Jesse's weekly grocery budget. He picked up his fork, practiced the smile he knew he'd need later, and tried not to think about sports trophies or dark eyes or the weight of choices not yet made.

The evening stretched ahead of him like a script already written. All he had to do was play his part.

Their entrees arrived – veal for Ezekiel, chicken and pasta for Jesse that he didn't remember agreeing to. The server presented each dish with a flourish, describing the preparations in careful detail that Jesse barely heard. His attention kept drifting to the surrounding couples, wondering if they were all following scripts, too.

"I thought about taking you to Paris for your birthday," Ezekiel said, cutting his veal into precise bites. "But I know how you hate missing work. Maybe for our honeym—" He caught himself, clearing his throat. "For another special occasion."

Jesse pushed his fish around the plate, creating patterns in the sauce. "Paris would be nice," he said automatically, though the thought of Ezekiel planning every minute of a Paris trip made him slightly nauseated.

The dessert cart approached their table, and Jesse's heart raced.

This was it.

This was the moment Ezekiel had orchestrated, when everything would change and yet somehow stay exactly the same – controlled, scheduled, safe.

Ezekiel's voice took on a careful, almost rehearsed tone that he reserved for important client meetings. Jesse watched as his partner stood, adjusting the impeccably pressed suit jacket that fit him like a second skin. With deliberate movements, Ezekiel moved to one knee beside their table, drawing the attention of other diners who couldn't help but sneak looks at the unfolding scene. Jesse's heart raced, knowing what was coming.

As Ezekiel dropped to one knee, Jesse noticed the phones coming out, cameras pointed their way. A woman at the next table whispered excitedly to her companion: "Oh my god, this is totally going to go viral. Like that couple from last month on Darcy Quinn…"

Jesse's stomach tightened. He'd seen that episode - another perfectly choreographed moment for public consumption. But this was different. This was real.

Wasn't it?

"Jesse Valentine," Ezekiel began, reaching into his pocket with a practiced ease, "from the moment we met…"

The box that emerged from his pocket was made of smooth black velvet, just as Jesse had expected. Everything was exactly

as he had envisioned it. As Ezekiel spoke about love and forever and building a life together, Jesse felt his own breath catch in his throat. And then came the question he had been waiting for: "Will you marry me?"

The ring slid onto his finger like a weighty promise, cool against his skin. The restaurant erupted in applause and somewhere in the background a cork popped open. Ezekiel beamed with pride and confidence, certain of their future together.

Jesse smiled and played his part perfectly, just as he always did with his perfectly styled hair and pressed shirt. But deep inside, where memories of whispered secrets in libraries and stolen kisses by the pool still lingered, something else stirred.

Something wild and untamed and real.

Something dangerous and real that would have to remain dormant for now.

The ride home was a blur of congratulatory texts and Ezekiel's excited chatter about wedding venues he'd already researched. Their apartment building's doorman offered enthusiastic congratulations – someone must have posted the video already. Jesse's smile felt frozen in place, his cheeks aching from holding it so long.

"Wait," Ezekiel said as they reached their door. "I want to do this right." Before Jesse could protest, Ezekiel had swept him into his arms, carrying him across the threshold. "Practice for the wedding night!"

Jesse forced a laugh, but internally cringed at the gesture – so calculated, so practiced, like everything else about this night. Still, he could see the genuine joy in Ezekiel's eyes, the earnest attempt at romance. His fiancé (that word felt strange even in his thoughts) had transformed their bedroom too – rose petals

scattered across the duvet, champagne chilling by the bed.

"You planned everything, didn't you?" Jesse said softly.

"I wanted it to be perfect." Ezekiel pulled him close, pressing kisses along his neck. "You deserve perfect."

Perfect. Like the proposal. Like the ring that now felt like a shackle on his finger. Like the way Ezekiel's hands moved over his body – gentle, precise, planned.

Nothing like the rough, desperate touches he remembered in the school library. Nothing like chlorine-scented kisses stolen between classes. Nothing like—

Jesse stepped away, seeking a moment of solitude in the bathroom. He needed to gather his thoughts and prepare for the forthcoming performance that he knew was expected of him. The noise from Ezekiel's movements in the bedroom could be heard through the door - the clinking of glasses, the sound of clothes being shed.

He stared at his engagement ring, remembering the night he first met Ezekiel at Jaime's gallery opening. He'd felt so out of place among the sophisticated crowd in his threadbare green cardigan - the same one Ezekiel now called 'awful.' But Ezekiel had been different then.

"The blue represents isolation," Jesse had overheard someone say pretentiously about one of Jaime's abstract pieces. "The artist's commentary on modern alienation."

"Or maybe," Ezekiel had interrupted with a playful smile, "she just really likes blue." He'd turned to Jesse, eyes warm with interest rather than judgment. "What do you think?"

"I think," Jesse had replied, surprised into honesty, "sometimes a painting can just be beautiful without needing to mean anything."

Instead of dismissing him, Ezekiel had lit up. "Finally, someone who speaks their mind in this crowd. I'm dying for real conversation

after an hour of people pretending to be art critics." He'd touched Jesse's cardigan sleeve. "Love this color on you, by the way. Brings out your eyes."

They'd spent the rest of the evening in their own world, Jesse talking passionately about books and writing while Ezekiel listened with genuine fascination. No criticism about Jesse's volume or enthusiasm, no suggestions for improvement. Just pure connection.

The memory faded as Jesse heard Ezekiel close the closet door in the bedroom, probably coordinating their outfits for tomorrow…

When had that appreciative gaze turned calculating?

When had *"love this color on you"* become *"wear what I chose"*?

Jesse emerged from the bathroom to find Ezekiel in his boxer-briefs… waiting.

The sheets were pulled back invitingly.

The flickering candlelight softened his powerful features, making him look younger, more vulnerable.

For a moment, Jesse saw echoes of the man he'd fallen for – the one who'd listened with rapt attention as Jesse rambled about his favorite books, who'd kissed him breathless in the rain after their third date.

"I love you," Ezekiel whispered, lowering Jesse to the rose-strewn bed.

Jesse closed his eyes as Ezekiel undressed him, as careful with Jesse's clothes as he was with everything else. In the darkness behind his eyelids, other hands touched him – calloused from swimming, urgent and demanding. Other lips claimed his – tasting of cigarettes and forbidden promises.

Their lovemaking was exactly what it always was – considerate, measured, pleasant. But in his mind, Jesse was transported to a different place entirely. In this fantasy, it was Anson above

him – six feet of lean muscle and raw power, built from years of competitive swimming and basketball. His black hair cascaded into those dark eyes that seemed to pierce through Jesse's defenses. A knowing smirk played across his lips, the same lips that used to whisper "Pretty Boy" against Jesse's skin in their reckless youth.

Unlike Ezekiel's carefully groomed stubble that always scratched against Jesse's skin, Anson's chest hair was natural and rugged – a symbol of his teenage masculinity. As their bodies pressed together, Jesse felt the softness of Anson's skin against his cheek, still carrying the warmth of perpetual summer. The muscles in Anson's back flexed with each move, displaying a panther-like grace in his human form. Broad shoulders and a defined chest made Anson seem larger than life, while his arms were powerful from countless laps in the pool. And as they moved together in perfect harmony, Jesse couldn't help but lose himself in this fantasy – one that would always hold a special place in his heart.

When he came, Jesse had to bite his lip hard enough to draw blood, trapping Anson's name behind his teeth. Guilt flooded him immediately, hot and thick as shame. Above him, Ezekiel was saying something about their future, about forever, about love.

After, Ezekiel held him close, pressing soft kisses to his shoulder. "Happy birthday, fiancé," he murmured, drifting off to sleep.

Jesse lay awake in the dark, his engagement ring catching what little light filtered through the windows. Ezekiel's arm draped across his waist felt wrong – too gentle, too careful. In his mind, stronger arms held him, possessive and fierce. Anson's arms, always Anson's, even after all these years. Arms

that could pull him under in the deep end, that could pin him against library shelves, that could break him as easily as they could hold him.

The roses on the bedspread had begun to wilt, their perfect arrangement disturbed by passion that felt anything but perfect. Jesse watched them fade in the darkness, wondering how many more nights he could pretend that safe love was enough.

4

VIRAL BOY

Jesse woke to the pale blue light of early morning and the low hum of Ezekiel's breathing beside him. For one unguarded moment, everything was still. No notifications. No hashtags. Just the warmth of another body and the faint smell of Ezekiel's cologne on the pillowcase—sandalwood and something clean, like pressed linen. Jesse let his eyes adjust to the dim room, watching the slow rise and fall of Ezekiel's chest. In sleep, Ezekiel's face lost its careful architecture. The jaw unclenched. The brow smoothed. He looked younger. Softer. Like the man Jesse had first met at that gallery opening three years ago, the one who'd laughed too loud at Jesse's joke about abstract art and then looked embarrassed about it, covering his mouth like joy was something that needed to be managed.

Jesse's ring caught a sliver of light from the window. He turned his hand slowly, watching the diamond throw tiny rainbows across the ceiling. Twenty-four hours ago, he hadn't been wearing it. Twenty-four hours ago, he'd been a different version of himself—or maybe the same version, just less

trapped.

His phone sat face-down on the nightstand where he'd left it, buzzing softly against the wood like something alive and restless. He reached for it, already dreading what he'd find.

The numbers were staggering. What had been a few hundred views when they'd fallen asleep had metastasized overnight into something enormous. The video had crossed platforms, leapt time zones, been shared and reshared until the intimate moment at Vincenzo's had become public property.

Jesse scrolled through the comments, each one a small, bright blade:

#RelationshipGoals

This is what love looks like!

I'm crying... so beautiful!

See? Gay love is just love 💕

His thumb hovered over the video. He hit play and watched himself say yes through strangers' eyes. Saw himself accept the ring, kiss Ezekiel, play his part perfectly. The Jesse on screen looked radiant, sure, flawless. Everything a newly engaged man should be. Nothing like the Jesse who had bitten his lip bloody last night to keep from crying out another man's name.

The mattress shifted. Ezekiel rolled toward him, one eye opening, already half-awake the way he always was—never groggy, never disoriented, as if even his subconscious kept a schedule.

"You're up early," Ezekiel murmured, his voice still rough

with sleep. His hand found Jesse's hip beneath the sheets, a reflex of intimacy so practiced it barely registered. But this morning, Jesse felt it. The weight of Ezekiel's palm, the absent way his thumb traced the bone. A gesture that asked for nothing. Expected nothing. Just *I'm here. You're here.* That simple.

"Couldn't sleep."

Ezekiel propped himself up on one elbow, squinting at the glow of Jesse's phone. "How bad is it?"

"Depends on your definition." Jesse tilted the screen toward him. "We've gone viral."

Ezekiel blinked at the numbers, and Jesse watched something flicker across his face—not excitement, not yet. Something closer to wonder, unfiltered and almost boyish, the same expression he'd worn the night they'd gotten their first table at Vincenzo's without a reservation. Like the world had handed him something he hadn't dared to expect.

"Jesse," he breathed. "Look at the views."

But the wonder lasted only a moment. Jesse kept scrolling, and the comments kept coming, faster now, each one adding weight to his shoulders:

OMG someone get Darcy Quinn on the phone!

This needs to be on national TV!

Please tell me they're going to share their story with the world!

Then his phone buzzed with a series of rapid-fire notifications that made his hands shake. A text from a number he hadn't seen in months but recognized the way you recognize a scar—

by feel, by memory, by the way your body tenses before your mind catches up:

Lloyd Valentine: *You're embarrassing this family. Your mother would be ashamed, seeing her son parade around like this. She's barely cold in her grave and you're disgracing her memory with this spectacle.*

Jesse's throat closed. The words hit him the way his father's words always hit him—not like a blow, but like a hand pressing down on a wound that had never fully healed. His mother's face flashed behind his eyes. The soft way she'd said his name. The last time she'd held him before everything broke apart.

He didn't realize his breathing had changed until Ezekiel's hand was on his wrist.

"Jesse." Ezekiel's voice had shifted. The sleepy warmth was gone, replaced by something alert and low and steady—the voice he used when things mattered. "What is it? What happened?"

Jesse couldn't speak. He just turned the phone so Ezekiel could see the screen.

He watched Ezekiel read it. Watched the softness drain from his face like water from a cracked glass. Ezekiel's jaw tightened—not the performative clench he used in boardrooms, but something rawer, something that started in his chest and climbed up through his throat and settled in the hard line of his mouth. His nostrils flared. His eyes went dark.

And then, without a word, Ezekiel took the phone from Jesse's hands.

Not grabbed. *Took.* Gently, the way you'd take a piece of broken glass from someone's palm. He held it for a moment,

reading the message one more time, and Jesse saw his thumb hover over the screen. Ezekiel's face was very still. Then he pressed delete.

"He doesn't get to touch today," Ezekiel said quietly. Not to the room. Not for an audience. Just to Jesse, his voice barely above a whisper. "He doesn't get to be here, in our bed, on our morning. Not today."

Jesse's eyes burned. Because this—*this* was the Ezekiel nobody else got to see. The one who'd held Jesse through the first anniversary of his mother's death without saying a word, just breathing with him in the dark. The one who'd driven three hours to confront Jesse's landlord when the heat went out in January. The one who, on their very first date, had noticed Jesse flinch at a man's raised voice two tables over and had simply moved to block Jesse's sightline, repositioning himself like a wall between Jesse and the sound.

Ezekiel set the phone face-down on the nightstand and pulled Jesse against his chest. His heartbeat was fast—Jesse could feel the anger in it, the controlled fury Ezekiel would never let reach his voice. He pressed his lips to the top of Jesse's head, and for a long, suspended moment, the viral video and the trending hashtags and the strangers' applause all fell away, and they were just two men in a bed, one of them hurting and the other one trying, in the only way he knew how, to build a wall around the hurt.

"I'm blocking his number," Ezekiel said into Jesse's hair. "On both our phones. And if he contacts the store, Maria knows to hang up."

"You don't have to—"

"Yes, I do." Ezekiel pulled back just enough to look at him, and his eyes were fierce and certain in a way that had nothing

to do with PR strategy or public image. "That man lost the right to your pain a long time ago. I won't let him weaponize your mother's memory against you. Not today. Not ever."

Jesse's chest ached. This was the knot at the center of everything—the reason he'd stayed three years, the reason leaving felt like pulling a knife from a wound that might bleed out without the blade. Because Ezekiel's love was a fortress. It had walls and rules and scheduled maintenance, but God, when the world came for Jesse, those walls held. They *always* held.

The problem was that Jesse was starting to realize he didn't want to live in a fortress. He wanted to live in a poem. And poems didn't have walls.

Ezekiel held him for another moment—thirty seconds, maybe forty, long enough for Jesse to feel the tension slowly leave his partner's shoulders as he made the mental shift from protector back to strategist. Jesse felt it happen almost physically: the softening of Ezekiel's arms, the slight straightening of his spine, the way his breathing evened out into something more measured. It was like watching a drawbridge rise.

Ezekiel reached for his own phone.

"Oh my God." His voice had changed again. Still warm, still Ezekiel, but there was a new frequency underneath it now—the buzz of possibility, the hum of a mind already three moves ahead. "Jesse. The Human Rights Campaign shared it."

Jesse wiped his eyes with the heel of his hand. "What?"

"And… wait…" Ezekiel sat up straighter, his thumb flying across the screen, and Jesse watched the transformation complete itself—from the man who'd just held him in the dark to the man who could see every angle, every opportunity, every headline. "Advocate Magazine wants to feature us in their next

issue!"

Jesse pulled the covers around himself, suddenly cold. Ezekiel was already out of bed, pacing, phone pressed to his ear. The intimacy of thirty seconds ago might as well have happened to different people.

"The Detroit Free Press wants to interview us," Ezekiel said, covering the phone's mic with his palm. "And look—we're trending on local Twitter. #DetroitLoveStory."

His eyes were bright, alive with a kind of purpose Jesse recognized. It was the same look Ezekiel got when he closed a major deal—the look that said *this matters, this is how we make a difference, this is how we prove we belong.* Jesse knew the calculation wasn't mercenary. Ezekiel genuinely believed that visibility was survival. That every perfectly curated public moment was a brick in a road that made it safer for people like them to walk through the world.

He wasn't wrong. That was the worst part.

"Your brother shared it," Ezekiel said suddenly, pausing mid-pace. "With a heart emoji."

Jesse's stomach clenched. "Noah?"

"No, he just liked it. This is… Kyle?"

"Kevin," Jesse corrected automatically. His youngest brother, who'd been only thirteen when Jesse left home. Who'd cried the hardest when their father had thrown Jesse out.

Ezekiel looked up from his phone, and something in Jesse's expression must have registered, because he softened—just for a beat, just a flicker of the man from five minutes ago.

"Hey." He crossed back to the bed, cupped Jesse's face with one hand. His thumb brushed Jesse's cheekbone. "Kevin shared it because he's proud of you. Focus on that. Not on Lloyd."

Then his phone buzzed again, and the hand dropped, and

Ezekiel was back to the screen, already dictating a response to someone about media coordination.

Jesse watched him go. *That,* he thought. *That thing he just did—the face, the touch, the three seconds of real before the phone pulled him back. That's why I said yes. That's why I stay. Because occasionally, the drawbridge comes down, and the man behind it is someone worth loving.*

And then the drawbridge goes back up, and I'm standing on the wrong side of the moat, wondering if I imagined the whole thing.

The notifications kept coming faster now. Each buzz felt like another brick in a wall being built around them, trapping them in this perfect moment that didn't feel perfect at all.

Jesse's throat tightened. Before he could process it, another message appeared:

Noah Valentine: *I understand if you don't want to see me, but it would mean the world to me. Kevin has been drawing his art again, just like you taught him. He created a beautiful piece about three brothers reuniting, and I know Mom would have loved it.*

Aunt Susan*: Jesse, honey, it's not too late to change. God loves you. He can help you find the right path again. I'm praying for you.*

Rachel*: DON'T LISTEN TO THEM, CUZ! I saw the video and cried happy tears! So proud of you. Love is love, and anyone who says different can fight me. Miss you so much.* ❤❤❤

Nikki: *Jesse... I've seen that smile before. It's the same one you wore in all our prom photos before... before everything. The one that doesn't reach your eyes. The one that says you're performing*

instead of living. Call me. Please. And erase this so Ezekiel doesn't see it.

Jesse's finger hovered over the delete button, but he couldn't bring himself to erase her words. She was the only one who could still see through his perfect performance.

Another notification caught his eye - a comment from someone that followed an art blog he followed as well.

ParkerD_Art posted: "Cool proposal video. The guy with the glasses reminds me of the person from my dad's old poems. The ones he thinks I don't know about. Same soft smile."

Parker D?

Jesse's heart stopped. Only one person could have written those poems. Only one person's son would recognize that smile.

Before he could think about it too hard, the phone buzzed again. This time it was Maria:

Just saw the video. You okay? Also, there's a crowd outside the store. Want me to put up the 'Closed' sign?

And next to her message, a comment on the viral post from "AmberD":

Some love stories deserve second chances. Right, ParkerD_Art?

The comment had been quickly deleted, but not before collecting a few confused replies.

Jesse clicked away quickly, his hands shaking as he picked

up his coffee.

"A crowd?" Jesse sat up, suddenly alert. "At Dapple & Mays?"

"This is amazing!" Ezekiel was practically glowing. "My firm's PR team already reached out. They want to do a piece about diverse representation in financial services. And look – the Michigan LGBT Chamber of Commerce wants us to speak at their next event!"

Jesse's manuscript sat on his desk across the room, mocking him. Marcus and Jason's story frozen mid-choice, while his own story was being written by thousands of strangers on the internet.

His phone lit up with another notification. This one made his blood run cold:

Darcy Quinn Show Official: We would love to have you and Ezekiel share your beautiful love story with our national audience. Please contact us to discuss details.

"Ezekiel," Jesse's voice shivered. "The Darcy Quinn Show just—"

"I know!" Ezekiel grabbed him, pulling him into a fierce kiss. "I already responded. Their producer's calling in an hour to work out details."

"You *what*?"

"This is it, babe. *Our* moment. *Our* chance to show the world what *genuine* love looks like."

Genuine love.

Jesse's hand shook as he set down his phone. He thought about all the couples he'd seen on her show, their love stories packaged and presented like perfect little boxes tied with bows. No mess, no complications, no ghosts from the past

threatening to burn everything down.

Jesse's stomach churned. He opened his mouth to protest, but his phone buzzed one final time.

A number he did not know.

313-555-9009: ***Hey there, pretty boy.***

The world stopped.

Jesse knew it like he knew his own heartbeat. Ten years later, and those four words still had the power to shatter everything.

Jesse's chest tightened as he read the words again, his fingers gripping the phone too tightly.

The voice echoed in his head—soft, teasing, but always with an edge. He could still feel the sharp sting of betrayal, how the laughter in Anson's tone could twist into something cruel when things didn't go his way. The bruise had faded, his broken jaw healed, but the phantom pain lingered, a reminder of how close passion could come to fury.

He touched his jaw unconsciously, remembering how Ezekiel had once asked why it clicked when he chewed. "Old injury," he'd said, leaving out the details. Ezekiel hadn't pressed for more, hadn't asked questions he didn't want answers to. And Jesse had been relieved. Safe. Unseen.

"Jesse?" Ezekiel's voice seemed to come from very far away. "Are you okay? You've gone pale."

"Fine," Jesse managed, his finger already hovering over the delete button. "Just… overwhelmed."

"I know, baby. It's a lot. But this is good! This is our chance to make a difference."

Jesse nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

On his phone screen, those four words burned like a brand:

Hey there, pretty boy.

Some ghosts, it seemed, didn't care about perfect viral moments or carefully crafted love stories. Some ghosts knew exactly when to rise from the past and burn everything to the ground.

Jesse's phone rang, Nikki's face lit up the screen –perfect timing

"Nikki," Jesse breathed into the phone.

"Oh my God, you went viral and you didn't call me immediately?" She didn't wait for an answer. "I woke up to twelve different people sending me the video."

In the background, Jesse could hear the familiar chaos of backstage - crew calls, moving sets, the Darcy Quinn Show playing on someone's TV. Nikki went quiet for a moment, and he could almost see her watching the screen with that intense focus she got when blocking a crucial scene.

"Nik? You still there?"

"What? Oh, yes. Sorry - just… multitasking."

"Nikki—"

"And that ring! Did he rob a bank? Actually, don't answer that, he probably has a spreadsheet showing exactly how many months' salary it cost and the current market value of diamonds versus—"

"*Nik*." Something in Jesse's voice made her stop. "*He* texted me."

A long pause. Then, quietly: "*Who* texted you?"

"You *know* who. Two seconds before you called."

"Shit." He could hear her moving, probably finding somewhere private. "What did *he* say?"

Jesse glanced at Ezekiel, who was still absorbed in his phone, making excited noises about retweet counts. "'Hey there, pretty

boy,'" he whispered.

"Fuck." Another pause. "Delete it. Right now. Delete it and block the number."

"I know, I—"

"No, you don't know. Because if you knew, you wouldn't have that tone in your voice right now. That's your '*maybe if*' voice, Jesse Valentine, and I haven't heard it since senior year when you thought a punch in the face meant love—"

"I have to go," Jesse cut her off. "Ezekiel's firm's PR team is calling."

"Jesse—"

"I'll call you later."

"*Promise* me you'll delete it."

But Jesse had already hung up, his thumb hovering over those three words that threatened to burn his perfect new life to the ground.

Jesse felt his heart racing as he stared at those four words on his phone screen. He knew he should delete the message, block the number, forget it ever happened. But his thumb trembled, refusing to follow through.

"Jesse?" Ezekiel's voice broke through his spiral. "The PR team is going to call soon. You ready?"

Jesse swallowed hard and forced a smile. "Yeah, just… give me a few?"

Ezekiel nodded without looking up from his phone. Jesse slipped out of bed and into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. He leaned against the cool tile, his forehead pressed against the mirror.

The phone felt impossibly heavy in his hand. He unlocked it again, those four words waiting for him like a time bomb:

Hey there, pretty boy.

Before he could stop himself, his fingers flew across the screen:
Why now?

The response came almost instantly:

Because I know that smile. You perfected it because of me. How come he doesn't know it?

Jesse's hands shook as he stared at the message. Memories flooded back - the first time he'd plastered on that smile to hide a broken heart, the way it had become second nature. He thought he'd left that part of himself behind.

But you didn't, did you? a traitorous voice whispered. *You just got better at hiding.*

Another message: *You look good, Jesse. But I know you. This isn't you.*

He shouldn't respond. He knew that. But his fingers moved of their own accord:

You don't know anything about me or my life now.

I know you're engaged to a man who doesn't see past that smile. I know you're still the same Jesse who used to write poetry about the stars in my eyes. I pulled them out last night. Even though I know them by heart.

Jesse's legs gave out and he sank to the floor, his back against the cool porcelain of the bathtub. His fingers shook as he typed:

Stop. Please. I can't do this.

But even as he sent it, Jesse knew it wasn't true. His heart raced, a mixture of fear and something else - something he didn't want to name.

The response came quickly: *Can't you? Or won't you? There's a difference, pretty boy. You taught me that.*

Jesse shut his eyes, surrendering to the tide of memories that rushed over him. The late nights spent pouring his heart into poetry, folding each piece into intricate triangles and carefully slipping them into Anson's calloused hands as they passed in the school hallway. The stolen kisses that ignited a fire within him, the whispered promises shared in the darkness that he clung to with all his being. And yes, there was pain too, but it was interwoven with an insatiable passion that consumed him. Just the mere thought of Anson's touch on his skin was enough to push Jesse to the brink of ecstasy.

Are you sitting on the floor with your back against the door to where he's waiting for you?

Jesse's breath caught in his throat. How could Anson know exactly where he was, what he was feeling? He typed back with trembling fingers:

How did you know?

Old habits die hard, pretty boy. Remember our secret hideout in the janitor's closet? You always sat like that when you were scared. You

probably have sleep in your eyes. Your hair is probably messy...and you probably look beautiful.

Jesse's heart pounded as he read Anson's words. He could almost feel those familiar hands running through his messy hair, brushing away the sleep from his eyes. Without thinking, he lifted his phone and snapped a quick selfie, his back still pressed against the bathtub, hair tousled, eyes sleepy and vulnerable.

He hesitated for a moment before hitting send.

Are you fucking crazy? He heard Nikki's voice scream at him.

He knew he was crossing a line he couldn't uncross. But the pull was too strong, the need to be truly seen overwhelming his better judgment.

Moments later, his phone buzzed:

My god, Jesse. You haven't changed a bit. Still the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

Jesse's cheeks flushed, and he couldn't help but smile as wide as his muscles would allow. A warmth spreading through his body that he hadn't felt in years. He was about to respond when a knock on the bathroom door made him jump.

"Jesse?" Ezekiel's voice called from the bedroom. "The PR team's on the line. You coming?"

Reality crashed back in. Jesse scrambled to his feet, splashing cold water on his face. In the mirror, he saw a stranger - a man with wide, panicked eyes and flushed cheeks. He took a deep breath, schooling his features into the calm, collected expression everyone expected.

"Be right there," he called back, his voice steady despite the

turmoil inside.

His phone buzzed again. Jesse knew he shouldn't look, but he couldn't help himself:

Coffee? For old time's sake? Please, Jesse.

Jesse closed his eyes. He knew if he saw Anson he would end up naked in his arms. It was inevitable. If he said 'yes' to this invitation, the deal would be sealed.

Jesse stared at the message, his heart pounding. He knew he should say no. He had a fiancé waiting for him, a viral engagement video, a life he'd carefully constructed. But the pull of the past was strong, and Anson's words awakened something in him he thought he'd buried long ago.

Please, pretty boy. Please.

His fingers hovered over the screen, trembling slightly. Before he could second-guess himself, he typed:

When and where?

The response came almost instantly:

Tonight. 8 PM. The Starlight Café. You remember it?

Jesse's breath caught. Of course, he remembered. It was right next to the little motel where they had spent their first entire night together.

Okay. I'll be there.

He hit send before he could change his mind.

He took a deep breath, tucked his phone away, and stepped out of the bathroom. Ezekiel beamed at him, holding out his own phone.

"Ready, babe? They're waiting."

Jesse nodded, forcing a smile. "Ready."

As Ezekiel launched into conversation with the PR team, Jesse's mind raced. He had just over eight hours until he was supposed to meet Anson. Eight hours to figure out what the hell he was going to do.

"This is it," Ezekiel said, putting his phone on speaker. "Remember, just be natural."

"Hello gentlemen!" A woman's voice filled the bedroom, crisp and professional. "I'm Stephanie Chen, head of PR at Morgan Stanley. I have Christopher Knox from our social media team here as well."

"And congratulations!" Christopher chimed in. "Your video is exactly the positive representation we love to see."

Jesse perched on the edge of the bed while Ezekiel paced, enthusiastically outlining their relationship timeline. The PR team *oohed* and *aahed* at all the right moments.

"So perfect," Stephanie gushed. "The successful financial analyst and the bookstore manager – it's like a romance novel!"

"Actually," Jesse spoke up, "I'm the assistant manager."

"Even better!" Christopher exclaimed. "A love story that crosses professional boundaries. Very relatable."

"We'd love to do a feature piece," Stephanie continued. "Focus on how Morgan Stanley's inclusive environment allowed Ezekiel to live authentically, leading to this beautiful moment."

"That sounds wonderful," Ezekiel beamed. "Doesn't it, babe?"

Jesse forced a smile into his voice. "Sure."

"And Jesse," Christopher added, "we'd love to highlight your creative side too. Ezekiel mentioned you're working on a novel?"

Jesse shot Ezekiel a look. "It's… not ready for—"

"It's a beautiful story," Ezekiel interrupted. "About two young men finding love. Very on-brand for what we're doing here."

"Perfect!" Stephanie clapped her hands. "A finance expert and a writer – breaking stereotypes left and right. Now, about the Darcy Quinn Show…"

As they discussed logistics and talking points, Jesse watched Ezekiel transform their relationship into sound bites and hashtags. Their private moments becoming public property, packaged for maximum engagement.

"Just be yourselves," Christopher advised as the call wrapped up. "America is ready for a love story like yours."

After they hung up, Ezekiel pulled Jesse into a hug. "Can you believe this? We're going to make such a difference."

Jesse buried his face in Ezekiel's shoulder, wondering which version of himself America was ready for – and if either of them was real.

The day passed in a blur of phone calls, social media management, and fielding questions from what felt like everyone he'd ever known. Jesse played his part perfectly, smiling and laughing at all the right moments, gushing about Ezekiel and their future together. But inside, he was in turmoil.

* * *

"I think I'm going to head to the store for a few hours," Jesse said, pulling on his jacket. "Clear my head a bit."

Ezekiel looked up from his laptop where he'd been drafting

social media responses. "Want me to come? We could do some impromptu interviews."

"No, I just… I need some quiet. Work on my manuscript." Jesse leaned down to kiss Ezekiel's cheek. "Don't wait up."

"Remember what Stephanie said – if reporters ask, we're just two people in love who want to show the world that love is love."

Jesse managed a tight smile. "Got it."

He couldn't wait to get to the store for sugar, so he stopped at the small coffee shop a few blocks from their apartment. He stopped dead in his tracks when he walked in and noticed they had written "***Congrats Jesse & Ezekiel!***" on their chalkboard. The barista smiled knowingly as he handed Jesse his mocha latte. "My girlfriend cried watching your video. Twice."

He stopped to get a pack of gum at the 7-11, and an elderly woman stopped him in the produce section, tears in her eyes. "My grandson came out last year," she said, squeezing his hand. "Your video helped me understand. Thank you."

Jesse's smile felt frozen on his face as he nodded and mumbled a polite response to the elderly woman. He hurried out of the store, his heart racing. The weight of expectations, of being a symbol, pressed down on him.

He checked his watch. 5:45. Just over two hours until he was supposed to meet Anson. His heartbeart sped up as he drove towards the bookstore.

As Jesse pulled into the parking lot of Dapple & Mays, he noticed a small crowd and some news vans gathered outside the store. His heart sank. He'd hoped for some peace and quiet, but it seemed his viral fame had followed him to work too.

"Jesse Valentine! How does it feel to be a viral sensation?"

"Was the proposal a surprise?"

"What do you say to young LGBTQ+ people watching your story?"

Jesse fell back on the PR team's talking points, pasting on his best camera-ready smile. "Ezekiel and I are just overwhelmed by the response.

We hope our story shows that love is love." The words felt hollow in his mouth. "If you'll excuse me, I have some work to catch up on."

"One more question! Your father—"

"No comment," Jesse cut them off, pushing through the glass doors into the sanctuary of his store. The familiar smell of books and coffee wrapped around him like armor, but even here he couldn't escape. Customers whispered and pointed, phones raised to capture photos of the man from the video.

Maria watched him from behind the café counter, her expression unreadable.

In a few hours, he'd ask her to lie for him. In a few hours, he'd walk into the Starlight Café and face a ghost who still had the power to burn his carefully constructed life to the ground.

He retreated to his office, closed the door, and tried to remember how to breathe. His manuscript lay open on the desk where he'd left it yesterday, Marcus frozen mid-confession, the words all wrong because Jesse had been too afraid to write the truth. Red ink marked the margins with questions he couldn't answer:

Why is Marcus really afraid?

What does he want?

What does he deserve?

As the day wound down, Jesse sat at his desk at Dapple & Mays, watching the minutes tick closer to eight o'clock. The store had been chaos all day – well-wishers, reporters, curious

onlookers all wanting a glimpse of the man from the viral video. His social media notifications had finally slowed to a manageable stream, but his father's words still burned in his mind:

She's barely cold in her grave, and you're disgracing her memory.

Maria set a latte in front of Jesse, the foam heart slightly off-center. She leaned against the counter, arms crossed, her purple hair catching the evening light. "So," she said, raising an eyebrow, "what's it like to be America's sweetheart?"

Jesse gave her a weak smile. "It's… overwhelming."

"Overwhelming," Maria repeated, her voice flat. "That's what people usually say about taxes, not proposals. You okay, boss man?"

"I'm fine," Jesse said quickly. Too quickly.

Maria tilted her head, studying him. "You know," she said, her voice softening, "you don't have to be fine. Just because Ezekiel planned the most Pinterest-perfect proposal in history doesn't mean you can't have complicated feelings about it."

Jesse's hands tightened around his coffee cup. "I don't have complicated feelings."

"Uh-huh." Maria's eyes flicked to his shaking hands. "Look, I get it. Ezekiel's great. He's stable, reliable, all the things people say you're supposed to want. But…" She trailed off, biting her lip.

"But what?" Jesse asked, his voice sharper than he intended.

"But do you love him?" The question hung in the air between them, heavy and unavoidable.

Jesse opened his mouth to respond, but no words came out. Love. Of course he loved Ezekiel. Didn't he?

Maria sighed, her expression softening. "I'm not trying to be mean, Jess. I just… I know you. And I know that look you

get when you're going through the motions."

"I'm not," Jesse insisted, though the words sounded hollow even to him.

"Sure," Maria said lightly, but the concern in her eyes didn't fade. "Just… think about it, okay? You deserve more than just 'perfect.' You deserve real."

Jesse watched a young couple browse the romance section, whispering and pointing at him. One of them clutched a copy of "Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda" like a shield. The shorter boy kept adjusting his beanie nervously while his boyfriend pretended to read back covers, stealing glances at Jesse between titles.

"They've been here an hour," Maria muttered. "Working up the courage to ask for a photo, I think. You're their hero now, whether you want to be or not."

Jesse felt the weight of his engagement ring, still unfamiliar on his finger. The same instinct that made him say yes to Ezekiel's proposal, that made him hide his own doubts to protect others - it pushed him forward now.

"That's a brilliant choice," he said softly, nodding at Simon. Both boys startled, the beanie one nearly dropping his phone. "Have you read 'Red, White and Royal Blue' yet? It's over here… "

"Oh my god," the taller one breathed. "We… we saw your video. Like, a hundred times."

"I came out to my mom because of you," Beanie blurted, then blushed furiously. "Sorry, I mean… you don't want to hear—"

"I do," Jesse interrupted, even as guilt twisted in his stomach. "Tell me about it?"

The boy's face lit up. "She always said she'd love me no matter what, but I was scared, you know? Then I showed her your

video, how happy everyone was at the restaurant, how normal and beautiful it all looked…" His boyfriend squeezed his hand. "She hugged me and said she just wants me to find someone who looks at me the way Ezekiel looks at you."

Jesse's smile felt like glass, brittle and sharp, but he held it steady. Because this - this trembling, hopeful boy clutching his boyfriend's hand - this was why he had to keep pretending. Had to be the hero they needed.

"Would you… could we maybe get a picture?" the taller one asked.

"Of course." Jesse moved between them, wrapping an arm around each boy's shoulders. Their happiness was real, even if his perfect love story wasn't. Maybe that could be enough.

Maria snapped the photo, her knowing eyes catching the way Jesse twisted his engagement ring, a nervous habit he'd already developed.

"Thank you," Beanie whispered. "For everything."

Jesse watched them leave, heads bent together over the photo, and felt the weight of their hope settle on his shoulders like a crown of thorns. His phone buzzed in his pocket -

Ezekiel: ***Dinner tonight to celebrate our social media success? I made reservations at 8.***

Jesse's stomach churned as he typed, walking back to the office: *Going to stay at the store with Maria tonight. Need to work on my manuscript while it's quiet. All this attention has me thinking about rewrites.*

The response was immediate:

Ezekiel: ***You sure? We should celebrate. I can bring dinner to***

the store.

Jesse*: No, really. You know how I get when I'm writing. Need the space. Don't wait up.*

Ezekiel: ***OK, babe. Don't work too hard. Love you.***

"Jesse?" Maria's voice was too gentle… "Whatever you're thinking about doing… just remember who you are now. Not who you were then."

He looked up sharply. "What?"

Before he could respond, his phone lit up again.

Anson: ***Can't wait to see you, Pretty Boy.***

Jesse set his phone down and looked up at Maria. "If I needed you to lie for me tonight… would you?"

Maria's face darkened. "About being here working on your manuscript?"

He nodded, not quite meeting her eyes.

"Of *course* I would," she mumbled. "But I wouldn't be happy about it." She leaned against his desk. "Jesse, again, *whatever* you're thinking of doing—"

"I just need you to say I was here if he asked."

"I see that look in your eyes. The same one you get when you're writing about Marcus and Jason. Like you're about to burn everything down just to feel the heat."

Jesse stood abruptly, grabbing his keys. "I have to go."

"Jesse—"

"The store's covered. I just… I need some air."

"Don't do anything stupid," she called after him, but he was

already heading for the door.

As he drove to the cafe, his phone kept buzzing. Ezekiel sending links to more news coverage. His brother Noah still trying to reach out. His father's condemnation sitting like poison in his inbox.

At 7:51, Jesse pulled into the parking lot of the Starlight Café. The neon sign flickered just like it had ten years ago, casting familiar shadows across the dashboard. The motel next door was still there, too. Room 112. Their room. Where so many walls came tumbling down.

His phone buzzed one last time.

Anson: ***Already here. Got your usual order.***

Jesse's hands gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white. He could drive away right now. Go home to Ezekiel, to safety, to his perfectly planned life. Delete Anson's number. Block him. Forget.

But some fires, once lit, never really go out.

They just wait for the right moment to burn everything down.

Jesse knew that whatever happened next would change everything.

Again.

5

PRETTY BOY

Jesse's phone lit up with Nikki's nightly check-in call. If he didn't answer, she'd keep calling until she did what she did best - cause a scene. Even from New York, she had ways of making her presence felt.

"You're going to meet him, aren't you?" No hello, just Nikki's voice cutting through the night, the familiar sounds of backstage chaos at her theater a fitting backdrop to his inner turmoil.

Jesse sat in his parked car, watching shadows move behind the cafe's steamy windows. His heart hammered against his ribs. "How did you—"

"Please. Maria texted me the moment he walked in. And I know you, Jesse Valentine. I know that look you get when you're about to burn everything down."

"I'm just getting coffee."

"With Anson Donovan?" He could hear her pacing backstage. "Sometimes the only way to fix a story is to throw out the ending and start over," she said, shifting into what he called her 'director voice.' "We had this beautiful, safe… boring ending

planned for my current show - very traditional, very expected. But it felt hollow. So we chucked it. Completely rewrote the final scene two days before opening."

"How'd that work out?" Jesse asked, knowing she wasn't really talking about her play.

"We created something real. Sometimes you have to be brave enough to destroy something safe to create something true." She paused. "The audience can always tell the difference between performed emotion and authentic feeling. Always."

The word 'authentic' hung between them, heavy with meaning.

"I have to go - Act Two is starting," she said softly. "Just… whatever you decide, remember who you are beneath all that perfect polish. And Jesse? I'll keep my phone on."

You can still drive away, Nikki's voice echoed in his head after she hung up. You can still choose not to burn everything down.

But his hand was already on the door handle, his feet already carrying him across the parking lot. The bell above the door chimed just like it used to, and for a moment he was seventeen again, sneaking in to meet his secret boyfriend while the rest of the world thought he was at the library studying.

The café was nearly empty, with only a few patrons: a couple of truckers at the counter, an elderly woman doing a crossword puzzle, and in the back booth…

Anson.

29 year old Anson Donovan, tall and lean, sat in the back booth of the nearly empty café. His dark hair, styled and shorter than it used to be, was still just as alluring as it fell across his forehead. His sleeves were rolled up, revealing toned arms, and his deep olive skin seemed to radiate warmth. He

had a smirk on his lips, framed by a short beard that added to his rugged charm. The years had been kind to him, making him look even more confident and dangerous than before.

"Hey there, *Pretty Boy*."

Jesse's knees nearly buckled at the sound of that voice. Deep, a little rough, like whiskey over gravel. Exactly how it had sounded in his dreams for the past decade.

"You're early," was all Jesse could manage.

"Couldn't wait." Anson gestured to the cup across from him. "Got your usual. Still take it sweet enough to rot your teeth?"

Jesse slid into the booth, careful to maintain a distance between them. But even across the table, Anson's presence was overwhelming – all heat and memory and danger.

"What are we doing here, Anson?"

That smirk widened slightly. "Having coffee with an old friend."

"We were *never* friends."

"No," Anson agreed, his eyes traveling over Jesse's face like he was memorizing it. "We were a *lot* more than *that*."

Jesse wrapped his hands around his coffee cup, needing something to ground him. Anson's presence across the table was magnetic, pulling at something deep inside him that he thought he'd buried years ago.

"I saw you on the news," Anson said, leaning back in his booth. The movement made his henley stretch across his chest, and Jesse forced himself not to stare. "Nice performance. That smile though…" He shook his head. "That's the same smile you used to give your parents when they asked if you were okay."

"Don't." Jesse's voice came out sharper than he intended.

"Don't what? Tell the truth?" Anson leaned forward, dropping his voice. "Come on, Pretty Boy. When's the last

time someone really saw you? Not the version you show to your perfect fiancé or your bookstore customers. The actual you."

"You lost the right to know the real me when you broke my jaw."

The air between them shifted, and for a moment, the smirk slid from Anson's face, replaced by something raw and vulnerable. Jesse saw it—the flash of regret, the weight of guilt that never fully disappeared.

"I deserve that," Anson said quietly. "But you need to know… I never meant to hurt you."

Jesse set his coffee down harder than he intended, the porcelain clinking against the saucer. "Never meant to hurt me?" His voice rose, trembling. "You didn't just hurt me, Anson. You shattered me."

"I know," Anson said softly, looking down at his hands.

"No, you don't." The words spilled out before Jesse could stop them, years of suppressed pain clawing to the surface. "Do you know what it's like to lie to an ER doctor? To say I tripped on the bleachers because I was too afraid to tell the truth? To hear people whispering the next day about how the faggot got what he deserved?" His voice shook, and he forced himself to keep going. "I didn't just lose you that night, Anson. I lost everything. My friends. My safety. My belief that love could be… good."

The words hung between them, heavy and sharp, cutting the air in the quiet café. Anson's face had gone pale, his earlier cockiness completely stripped away. He sat perfectly still, staring at Jesse like he'd just been struck.

"I know," Anson finally said, his voice barely above a whisper. "And I've spent every day since then hating myself for it."

"Good," Jesse said flatly. "You should."

Anson flinched, but he didn't look away. "You have every right to hate me. I hate me for what I did. I was scared, Jesse. Not of you—of myself. Of how much I needed you, how much I wanted you. I didn't know how to handle it, so I… I lashed out."

Jesse let out a bitter laugh. "That's a nice excuse. You were scared. So you hit me? Do you know how fucked up that is?"

"I do." Anson's voice cracked, and he ran a hand through his hair, his composure unraveling. "I know it doesn't change anything, but I've spent ten years wishing I could go back to that night and do it differently. Wishing I could tell you how sorry I am. You were the best thing in my life, Jesse, and I ruined it because I was too much of a coward to admit that."

Jesse stared at him, searching his face for any sign of deception. But all he saw was pain, raw and unfiltered, mirroring the ache in his own chest.

"Why now?" Jesse asked finally, his voice quieter but no less sharp. "Why are you telling me this now, after all these years?"

Anson's shoulders sagged, and he looked down at the table. "Because I saw that video of you and your fiancé, and all I could think was… he doesn't know you. Not the real you. The Jesse I knew would never settle for safe."

Jesse's grip on his coffee cup tightened. "The Jesse you knew was stupid enough to think he could love someone's pain away."

"The Jesse I knew was brave enough to love without limits." Anson reached across the table, his fingers brushing Jesse's hand. The touch sent electricity through Jesse's body. "The Jesse I knew wrote poetry about stars and possibility. He dreamed about writing stories that would change lives. He—"

"Stop." Jesse pulled his hand away, but the ghost of Anson's

touch lingered like a brand. "That Jesse grew up. He realized you and I were a trainwreck waiting to happen."

"We were *fire*," Anson countered, leaning in closer. "We burned bright and hot and yeah, maybe we burned each other. But don't tell me you don't miss that heat."

He could feel that heat radiating from Anson's body, smell the familiar scent of his cologne mixed with something uniquely him just like his bedroom on Jesse's seventeenth birthday. It was intoxicating, and for a moment, Jesse allowed himself to remember.

Stolen kisses in empty classrooms. Hushed laughter under starlit skies. The feeling of Anson's hands on his skin, igniting fires he didn't know existed. The way Anson had looked at him like he was the only person in the world who mattered.

"Stop." Jesse pulled his hand away, but the ghost of Anson's touch lingered like a brand. "That Jesse grew up. He learned that some dreams just burn you."

"Did he?" Anson's eyes held Jesse's, searching. "Or did he just get better at pretending?" He nodded toward Jesse's hand. "That ring looks heavy."

Jesse resisted the urge to twist the engagement ring on his finger. "Ezekiel is good to me."

"Good to you," Anson repeated, that familiar smirk playing at his lips. "Like a warm blanket is good to you. Like decaf coffee is good to you. Tell me, Pretty Boy, when's the last time something was so good it scared you?"

Heat crept up Jesse's neck. "I'm not seventeen anymore, Anson. I don't need everything to be… dangerous to be real."

"No?" Anson leaned forward again, his voice dropping to that rough whisper that used to make Jesse's knees weak. "Then *why are you here*?"

The question hit Jesse like a physical blow. Why was he here? Why had he lied to Ezekiel, enlisted Maria's help, risked everything he'd built just to sit across from the man who'd broken more than just his jaw ten years ago?

"I don't know," he admitted quietly.

"I think you do." Anson's eyes dropped to Jesse's lips for just a moment. "I think you're here because that banker boy might be good to you, but he doesn't make your heart race. Doesn't make you write poetry at three in the morning. And even if you did, he probably wouldn't even read them. He doesn't make you feel like you're drowning and flying at the same time."

"That's not fair."

"Neither is pretending to be someone you're not for the rest of your life." Anson's hand slid across the table again, this time wrapping around Jesse's wrist. His thumb found Jesse's pulse point, pressing gently. "Your heart's racing right now, Pretty Boy. Tell me I'm wrong."

Jesse couldn't speak. Couldn't move. Couldn't do anything but feel the heat of Anson's skin against his, the weight of those dark eyes, the pull of memories he'd tried so hard to forget.

"Do you still write?" Anson asked softly, his thumb still stroking Jesse's wrist.

"You know I do."

"Still working on that story about the swimmer and the bookworm?"

Jesse's breath caught. "How did you—"

"I read *everything* you published online. Under your pen name." Anson's lips curved. "J.V. Stars. Subtle."

"You… you read my writing?"

"Every word. A thousand times." Anson's grip tightened slightly. "I recognized us in every story. Every poem. Even

that novel you're working on – *Marcus* and *Jason*? Come *on*, Pretty Boy. You're not exactly subtle."

Jesse pulled his hand away, rubbing his wrist where Anson's touch still burned. "It's *fiction*."

"Is it?" Anson's smirk deepened. "Then why can't you figure out the ending? Why does Marcus keep changing his mind about whom to choose? Maybe because his creator is still running from the truth?"

"And what truth is that?"

"That safe isn't the same as happy." Anson shifted in his seat, leaning closer. "That sometimes the most dangerous thing you can do is pretend to be something you're not."

Jesse's coffee had grown cold, forgotten between them. "But *now*?" Jesse laughed, but it came out bitter. "Now that I'm engaged? Now that our proposal video has gone *viral*? Now that my whole life is finally—"

"Perfect?" Anson cut him off. "Is that what you want? Perfect? The Jesse I knew wanted real. Even when it hurt. Especially when it *burned*."

"The Jesse you knew was an idiot who thought love could fix anything."

"The Jesse I knew," Anson's voice dropped to barely above a whisper, "used to write poems about how stars are just scars in the sky. How the most beautiful things come from damage. How sometimes you have to break to become who you're meant to be."

Jesse's chest tightened. He remembered writing those words, huddled in his bed after another secret meeting, his heart so full of Anson it felt like it might explode.

"I kept them all," Anson continued softly. "Every poem. Every note. Even that stupid Valentine you slipped into my swim bag

junior year."

"Stop."

"Make me." The challenge in Anson's eyes was familiar as heartbreak. "Tell me you don't think about that library. Tell me you don't remember how it felt when nothing existed except us. Tell me you don't wake up sometimes reaching for me instead of him."

Jesse stood abruptly, his hands shaking. "I can't do this."

"Can't?" Anson rose too, suddenly close enough that Jesse could smell his cologne – something woodsy and dark, so different from Ezekiel's carefully chosen designer scent. "Or won't?"

"Both," Jesse whispered, but he didn't step back. Couldn't step back. Anson's gravity was too strong, had always been too strong. "I have a life now. A future."

"A future playing a part." Anson's hand came up, hovering near Jesse's face but not quite touching. "Being who everyone else wants you to be."

"And who do you want me to be?"

"Just you." Anson's voice was rough. "The real you. The one who used to sneak into swim practice just to watch me. The one who wrote lines like 'loving you is like drowning in starlight' on notebook paper and slipped them in my locker. The one who wasn't afraid to burn."

Jesse closed his eyes, fighting the pull of memory. "That Jesse didn't know any better."

"That Jesse knew exactly what he wanted." Anson's fingers finally made contact, brushing a strand of hair from Jesse's forehead. The touch sent electricity through his whole body. "And I think he still does."

"Don't." But Jesse didn't move away.

"Your hair's different," Anson murmured, his fingers trailing down to Jesse's temple. "All styled and proper. Bet that was his idea too."

"Anson—"

"Remember how you used to wear it? All messy and *soft*. Used to drive me *crazy*, watching it fall in your eyes while you read."

Jesse's breath hitched. "Please."

"Please what, Pretty Boy?" Anson's thumb brushed Jesse's cheekbone. "Please stop? Please don't remind you how good we were? Please don't tell you that I haven't touched anyone since that night without wishing it was you?"

"You *married* her," Jesse said, the tears finally falling from his eyes. "You married her and had a son and played straight while I was still picking up the pieces, and now that I finally have something. . .*stable*…"

Anson's hand dropped from Jesse's face like he'd been burned. The pain that flashed across his features was raw, real.

"I did," he admitted quietly. "I married Amber because she was pregnant and I was terrified and my father—" He stopped, running a hand through his hair. "I did everything I was supposed to do. Everything that was *expected*. Just like *you're* doing *now*."

"Don't compare my engagement to your marriage."

"Why not? We're both hiding, right? Both trying to be what others expect of us?" Anson's voice was full of emotion. "The only difference is, I stopped pretending. I told her everything. Got divorced. Accepted and embraced who I am, who I've always been."

"And Parker?" Jesse's voice cracked on the name. "Your son?"

Something softened in Anson's eyes. "He's nine now. Smart.

Sensitive. Loves art and books…" He swallowed hard. "Sometimes I look at him and think about how I used to treat guys like him. Guys like you. It keeps me up at night."

The tears were flowing freely now, and Jesse didn't try to stop them. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I need you to understand. I'm not that scared, foolish kid anymore. The one who hurt you because he couldn't face himself." Anson stepped closer again. "I'm ready *now*, Pretty Boy. Ready to be who you always knew I could be."

Jesse wiped at his tears with the back of his hand. "It's too late."

"Is it?" Anson reached out, catching one of Jesse's tears with his thumb. "Then *why* are you *here*? Why not just delete my number? Block me? Go home to your perfect fiancé and your perfect life?"

"I don't know," Jesse whispered, but it was a lie and they both knew it.

"Parker asks about you sometimes," Anson said softly, his hand still cradling Jesse's face. "He found those poems in my dresser drawer. Asked who J.V. Stars was."

Jesse's breath caught. "What did you tell him?"

"That you were the best person I ever knew. And that I destroyed everything because I was too afraid to love you the way you deserved."

"Anson—"

"He draws these pictures," Anson continued, his voice rough. "Dragons and knights and princes. His mom… she doesn't understand. Says he needs to be more 'normal.' But all I can think is that he's like you were. Seeing beauty where everyone else sees wrong."

He could almost picture it - Anson's son, probably with his

father's dark eyes, sketching stories too beautiful for small minds to understand.

Fresh tears spilled down Jesse's cheeks. "Stop."

"Make me." Anson's thumb brushed away another tear. "Tell me you don't feel this. Tell me you don't remember every moment. Tell me you don't still taste me when he kisses you."

"I'm engaged."

"That's not an answer."

"I can't—" Jesse's voice broke. "I can't do this again. You'll destroy me."

"No," Anson breathed, leaning closer. "I'll save you from destroying yourself."

"I need air," Jesse managed, stumbling away from Anson's touch. He pushed through the café door, the cool October night hitting his heated skin.

The neon sign cast everything in a surreal glow – the cracked pavement, the weeds pushing through concrete, the motel next door where they'd first… Jesse pressed his palms against his eyes, trying to stop the flood of memories.

He heard the door open behind him, knew without looking that Anson had followed. Could feel his presence like a physical force.

"Pretty Boy," Anson's voice was soft, dangerous. "Look at me."

Jesse turned, and the sight of Anson in the neon light knocked the breath from his lungs. He looked exactly like he had that first night – dangerous and beautiful and everything Jesse had ever wanted.

"Tell me to leave," Anson said, moving closer. "Tell me you don't want this."

Instead of answering, Jesse grabbed Anson's henley and

pulled him forward. Their lips crashed together with ten years of longing, of regret, of need too powerful to deny. Anson made a sound low in his throat, pushing Jesse against the brick wall of the café. His hands tangled in Jesse's carefully styled hair, messing it up, making it his again.

The kiss tasted like coffee and tears and memory. Like chlorine and secret notes and forbidden touches in the library stacks. Like everything Jesse had been trying to forget and everything he couldn't stop remembering.

Anson kissed like he always had – all passion and possession, claiming Jesse's mouth like he was dying of thirst. His body pressed Jesse into the wall, solid and real and so different from Ezekiel's careful embraces.

Jesse slipped his hands under Anson's shirt, savoring the feel of warm skin beneath his fingertips. He traced his way up and down Anson's back, pausing to appreciate the defined muscles. His hand trailed lower, caressing Anson's firm abdomen before finally landing on his broad chest with a gentle squeeze. Sparks flew between them as their bodies pressed closer together.

He'd known Anson's body like a second language at seventeen, but this was something new-deeper, richer, a symphony of memories and rediscovery. Every touch spoke of the boy he'd loved and the man he was falling for all over again.

When they finally broke apart, both breathing hard, Anson rested his forehead against Jesse's.

"Fuck," he whispered. "You still taste like starlight."

"And you still taste like…*fire*."

"Is your tongue burning, Pretty Boy?" Anson asked, kissing him again.

"Yes…" Jesse said, a smile forming on his lips. "It burns so good."

Anson laughed into Jesse's mouth, "There's my pretty boy."

With each kiss, Jesse felt Anson pulling him back to himself-reminding him of the boy who had loved so openly, so recklessly, and of the man who still carried that same capacity for fire deep within him.

"Do you have a room?" Jesse asked, his voice rough with need. He already knew the answer – knew Anson would have thought this far ahead, would have planned for the possibility just like he used to.

Anson's eyes darkened, that familiar predatory smirk playing across his lips. "Room 112."

The same room. Their room. Of course it was.

"You bastard," Jesse whispered, but his hands were already inside Anson's shirt again.

"Tell me no," Anson breathed against his mouth. "Tell me to let you go back to your perfect life."

Instead, Jesse kissed him again, hard and desperate. When they broke apart, Anson's eyes were almost black with desire.

"Come on, Pretty Boy," he said, taking Jesse's hand. "Let me remind you what *real* feels like."

There was no hesitation, no doubt. With Anson, it was always this way-like the universe had shifted to bring them back together, like their bodies had been designed to fit together.

As they walked toward the motel, the neon sign flickering above them, Jesse knew he was about to burn his whole life down.

And god help him, he couldn't wait to feel the heat.

6

BURNING BOY

Room 112 hadn't changed either. Same faded wallpaper, same cheap carpet, same queen-sized bed that had witnessed their first *everything*. Anson's key card shook slightly in the lock, betraying that maybe he wasn't as confident as he seemed.

The door had barely clicked shut when Anson pressed him against it, his mouth urgent and unapologetic.

Jesse's fingers fumbled at the button of Anson's jeans, finding skin he hadn't touched in a decade but knew as if no time had passed. The feel of it-warm, solid, and wholly Anson-sent a jolt through him, waking parts of himself he'd thought long dead. This wasn't just passion; it was recognition. It was his body remembering where it belonged.

"God, Pretty Boy," Anson breathed against his neck. "Do you know how many times I've dreamed about this?"

"Show me," Jesse challenged, and Anson growled low in his throat.

They stumbled toward the bed, leaving a trail of clothes in their wake. When Anson finally pulled back to look at him,

Jesse felt exposed in a way that had nothing to do with being naked. Those dark eyes saw everything – past and present, truth and lies, all the pieces of himself he'd tried to hide.

"You're still the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," Anson murmured, his calloused hands tracing Jesse's skin like he was trying to memorize it. Then his eyes caught on something and darkened. "Take it off."

Jesse followed his gaze to the engagement ring still on his finger. For a moment, he hesitated.

"Please," Anson's voice was rough. "I need you to be just mine. Even if it's only for tonight."

With trembling fingers, Jesse slipped off the ring and placed it on the nightstand. As soon as he did, Anson was on him again, pressing him into the mattress, marking him in all the ways Ezekiel never did.

"Mine," Anson growled against his throat, the word sinking into Jesse's skin like a brand. Jesse surrendered to the heat, not as an act of weakness but of liberation. This wasn't about being claimed-it was about belonging. The burns he would carry from this night wouldn't be wounds; they'd be proof that he'd found something real, something worth every scar.

And Jesse surrendered to the flame, knowing he'd wear the burns like badges of honor.

Every touch was both a memory and a revelation. Anson's body felt different now-stronger, more defined-but the way he moved, the way he touched Jesse like he was something sacred, hadn't changed. The new scars on his skin weren't just marks; they were chapters in the story of the man he'd become, a man Jesse wanted to know all over again. Every kiss was a promise: that they hadn't lost each other, not really.

"You're still so responsive," Anson murmured against his

skin. "Still so perfect for me."

Jesse arched into his touch, past and present blurring until he couldn't tell if he was seventeen or twenty-eight. All he knew was Anson's weight above him, Anson's hands mapping his body, Anson's mouth claiming him over and over.

Anson's touch was raw, unrestrained, and exactly what Jesse needed. It wasn't careful or planned-it was instinctive, as if Anson were tracing the map of their shared history with his hands. Every touch burned away the careful layers Jesse had built around himself, exposing the boy who had once loved without hesitation and the man who had never stopped. This wasn't just physical-it was reclamation, a rediscovery of who they'd always been together.

"Look at me," Anson demanded, his voice rough with emotion. "I need to see you."

Jesse opened his eyes, meeting that intense gaze. In the dim light, he could see everything Anson was trying to say – all the regret, all the longing, all the love that had never really died.

"I missed you," Jesse whispered, the words torn from somewhere deep inside. "God, Anson, I missed you so much."

Anson's rhythm faltered, his control finally breaking. "Pretty Boy," he groaned, burying his face in Jesse's neck. "My Pretty Boy."

When they came, it was together, a moment that felt infinite and impossibly right. Jesse's body trembled as waves of sensation and memory collided, the years between them dissolving into nothing. It wasn't just release-it was a return, a homecoming to the one place he'd always belonged.

Anson's arms around him, his breath on Jesse's skin-it was everything he hadn't known he was still searching for.

This was *now*, and as they lay tangled in cheap motel sheets,

both breathing hard, Jesse knew everything had changed.

Again.

* * *

They lay tangled in the quiet aftermath, the weight of the moment pressing against Jesse's chest. Anson's fingers traced patterns across his skin, not just touching him but grounding him, reminding him that this wasn't a dream. Jesse closed his eyes, letting the sensations anchor him. He wasn't just lying beside Anson-he was lying beside the truth of who he was, the person he'd always been when they were together.

"Your chest hair is still soft," Jesse murmured, running his fingers through it. "Still never shaved it."

"Still the fastest," Anson smirked, but his eyes were tender. "God, I missed touching you like this. Just… being with you."

"Tell me about Parker," Jesse whispered.

Anson's face lit up in a way Jesse had never seen before. "He's… he's amazing. Smart as hell. Writes these stories about dragon princes falling in love with knight princes." He paused, swallowing hard. "He reminds me of you sometimes. The way he sees the world… the way he feels everything so deeply."

"Does he know about…?"

"About me? Yeah. Told him last year." Anson's fingers found Jesse's hair, playing with the strands. "He asked me if I ever loved anyone before his mom. I couldn't lie to him."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I loved a boy who wrote poetry about stars. That I was too scared to be who I really was, and I hurt him because of it." Anson's voice cracked slightly. "He hugged me and said love shouldn't have to hide."

Jesse's heart ached. "Sounds like an incredible kid."

"He is. Better than I deserve." Anson's hand moved to Jesse's face, thumb brushing his cheekbone. "He'd love you, you know. Both of you are too good for this world."

"Anson—"

"I mean it. You always saw the best in everyone. Even me, when I was at my worst." His eyes dropped to Jesse's throat, where marks were already forming. "I'm sorry I made you hide back then. Sorry, I made you feel like our love was something shameful."

Jesse caught Anson's hand, pressing a kiss to his palm. "We were kids."

"No excuse for what I did to you." Anson's other hand traced Jesse's jaw, where he'd broken it that night. "I think about it every day. How I hurt the one person who truly loved me."

With a sigh, Jesse rolled off of Anson's chest and onto his back, taking in the sight of the moonlit ceiling above. But the pull of Anson's embrace was too strong, and he found himself snuggling back into the warmth and security of his lover's broad chest.

"Tell me more," Jesse whispered against Anson's chest. "About what he draws."

"Last week, he showed me this cartoon he made of me - but I was a dragon, breathing fire to protect this knight who was reading a book…" Anson's voice caught. "Later I found him going through my old yearbooks. He pointed right at your photo and said 'Is this the boy from your poems?' Kids, they just… they see everything, you know?"

Jesse smiled, thinking of Anson holding a baby with his big brown eyes. Jesse's heart swelled with a bittersweet ache. He could picture it so clearly - Anson as a protective dragon, fierce

and loyal. And the idea of Anson's son recognizing him from old poems… it was almost too much.

"There's no doubt in my mind that you're an amazing dad," Jesse murmured, tracing the lines of Anson's palm.

Anson's laugh was soft and self-deprecating. "I try. Some days I feel like I'm just fumbling in the dark, you know? But Parker… he makes me want to be better. To be the kind of man who deserves him."

There was a vulnerability in Anson's voice that Jesse had rarely heard before. It made something ache deep in his chest, a bittersweet mix of pride and longing.

Anson's gentle touch and soft voice provided a safe space for Jesse to open up. "Tell me about him," Anson asked, tracing his fingers down Jesse's back. "Why did you say yes?"

Jesse tensed initially, but the comforting touch from Anson helped him relax. "He's… secure. Steady. Everything you weren't. Everything I thought I should want."

"But not everything you *do* want?"

"He takes care of me," Jesse confessed in a hushed tone. "Plans everything. Makes sure I have healthy meals, dress appropriately, live a conventional life. He probably has a spreadsheet for our entire future."

"Sounds suffocating." Anson's hand paused on Jesse's hip.

"It's… comfortable. Like soaking in a warm bath. Nothing like—"

"Nothing like drowning in chlorine and starlight?" Anson's voice grew rougher. "Nothing like burning from the inside out?"

"No," Jesse conceded. "Nothing like us." He propped himself up on one elbow, gazing down at Anson. "He's never read my writing. Says he'll wait until it's 'done.' But you…"

"I've read every word you've ever written. And I still do." Anson reached up to trace Jesse's lips with his fingers. "He doesn't see the real you, does he? The one who writes poetry about scars in the sky and love that both hurts and heals."

"He sees who he wants me to be." Jesse's voice cracked as he spoke honestly. "Who everyone wants me to be. Perfect Jesse. Safe Jesse. The Jesse who isn't…burning."

"Pretty Boy," Anson pulled him down for a kiss that tasted like raw honesty. "You were never meant to be safe." After a moment, he paused and Jesse felt his muscles clench beneath him before Anson asked quietly, "Do you love him?"

Jesse hesitated, feeling the weight of the question bearing down on him. "No." He was surprised by how easily the truth flowed out of him. And how freeing it felt to finally tell someone. "I love what he represents," he admitted. "Security. Normalcy. The kind of life where I don't have to worry about being left alone in a parking lot with a broken jaw."

Anson winced, his hand dropping from Jesse's face. "Jesse, I—"

"I'm not saying that to hurt you…it's just the truth. The answer to your question. You didn't just hurt me," Jesse cut in, his voice tight. "You made me terrified to love anyone who couldn't promise me a script. And Ezekiel? He's all script. No surprises, no passion, no…risk."

Jesse took a shaky breath, the air between them thick with the weight of what had been said. He reached for Anson's hand, their fingers tangling together on the table as if bridging the impossible gap of ten years.

"I need you to hear me," Jesse said, his voice softer now, though still trembling. "That night… Prom night… It broke something in me. Not just my jaw. You were the only person I

ever let see me—the real me. And when you hit me, I thought… I thought that was the universe telling me I was wrong to trust you. That I was stupid for believing we could ever exist outside of secrets and stolen moments."

Anson looked down at their joined hands, his own trembling slightly. "Jesse, I'm so—"

Jesse squeezed his hand, stopping him. "I know. I know you're sorry, Anson. I see it in the way you talk about Parker, in the way you're trying to be better now. And I believe you. I really do." His voice cracked, and he swallowed hard. "But believing your apology doesn't erase what happened. It doesn't make the fear go away. It doesn't undo the years I spent thinking I wasn't worth loving."

Anson's eyes were glassy, his voice thick with emotion. "You were always worth it. I just… I didn't know how to be brave enough to show you that. Not then. I think about that night all the time," Anson said, his voice was low, almost inaudible, but it carried the weight of ten years' worth of regret. "What I did to you. How I hurt you. It's *haunted* me, Jesse."

Jesse stiffened slightly, the warmth of Anson's touch momentarily eclipsed by the cold memory of pain. "You didn't just hurt me, Anson," he said, his voice trembling. "You broke me. You made me feel like loving you was a mistake. Like I was the mistake."

Anson let out a shaky breath, his hand stilling on Jesse's back. "I know," he whispered. "And I'll never stop being sorry for that. For being too scared to love you the way you deserved. For taking my fear out on you. There's no excuse, Jesse. There never was."

Jesse sat up slightly, looking down at him. The neon glow from the motel sign outside cast Anson's face in sharp relief,

highlighting the pain etched into his features. "Do you even *know* what it was like for me afterward?" he asked, his voice tight. "The lies I had to tell? The whispers? The way people looked at me like I got what I *deserved*?"

Anson's eyes filled with tears, his jaw clenching as he struggled to find the words. "I don't," he admitted. "I can't even imagine. But Jesse, if I could go back—if I could trade anything to undo it, I would. I'd give anything to have held your hand that night instead of… instead of—"

"You can't go back," Jesse interrupted, his tone sharper than he intended. "You can't undo what happened, Anson. And for years, I hated you for that. I hated you for what you did, for how you made me feel, for leaving me to pick up the pieces on my own."

Anson's breath hitched, and he sat up too, his hand reaching for Jesse's but stopping just short of touching him. "I hated myself too," he said, his voice cracking. "Every day since then, I've hated myself for being too much of a coward to love you the way you deserved. I don't expect you to forgive me, Jesse. I don't deserve it."

Jesse stared at him for a long moment, his chest tightening as he took in the raw honesty in Anson's gaze. And then, with a sigh, he reached for Anson's hand, threading their fingers together.

"I do forgive you," Jesse said quietly. "Not because you deserve it. But because I need to."

Anson's eyes widened, his lips parting in surprise. "Jesse…"

"I've spent so much of my life being angry at you, carrying this weight around like it was mine to bear. But holding onto that anger hasn't done anything but keep me trapped in the past." Jesse's voice trembled, but he kept going. "And I can't live

there anymore, Anson. I can't keep letting that night define me. Define us."

Anson's grip on his hand tightened, and Jesse felt the tremor in his fingers. "You're not trapped anymore," Anson said softly. "I see you, Jesse. I see all of you. And I swear to you, I will spend the rest of my life proving that I can be the man you deserve."

Jesse gave a small, bittersweet smile. "I'm not forgiving you for you, Anson. I'm forgiving you for me. Because I don't want to carry this pain anymore. And maybe… maybe forgiving you is the first step toward letting it go."

Anson's breath shuddered, and for a moment, he looked like he might break under the weight of Jesse's words. But then he nodded, his gaze steady and full of something Jesse hadn't seen in a long time: hope.

"Thank you," Anson whispered, his voice rough with emotion. "Thank you for loving yourself enough to forgive me."

Jesse leaned forward, resting his forehead against Anson's. "We'll figure it out," he said quietly. "Whatever this is, whatever comes next… we'll figure it out."

For the first time in years, Jesse felt a sense of release, as though a weight he hadn't even realized he'd been carrying had finally lifted. Anson's arms wrapped around him, holding him close, and for the first time, it didn't feel like a memory.

It felt real.

It felt like a beginning.

"Does he know? The banker… About us? About who you were before him?"

"He knows I had my heart broken in high school. That's all." Jesse's fingers traced the muscles of Anson's chest. "He thinks that's why I'm so careful now. Why I let him make all

the decisions."

"Is that why you let him control everything? Your clothes, your hair, your food?"

"He doesn't control—" Jesse stopped, realizing the truth in Anson's words. "He just wants what's best for me."

"Best for you?" Anson's voice held an edge. "Or best for his image of you? The perfectly polished boyfriend who looks good at bank functions and doesn't embarrass him with messy emotions?"

"That's not fair."

"Isn't it? The Jesse I knew," Anson murmured, his fingers brushing through Jesse's hair, "shone so brightly it hurt to look at him. He wasn't afraid to take up space, to burn so brightly he lit up everyone around him. That's the Jesse I fell in love with. The one I never *stopped* loving. The Jesse who wrote poems in the middle of the night and slipped them into my locker. The Jesse who kissed me in the library stacks, not caring if anyone saw."

"That Jesse got his heart broken."

"By me," Anson's voice cracked. "But at least I never tried to change who you are. Even when I was scared, even when I was cruel… I loved you exactly as you were. Wild and beautiful and *real*."

Jesse felt a tear slide down his cheek. "He's good to me, Anson."

"Good to you like a cage is good to a wild thing? Keeping you safe but not free?"

The truth of it hit Jesse hard. He thought about all the little ways Ezekiel had reshaped him over the years. The careful suggestions about his appearance, his career, his writing. The subtle corrections to make him more "professional," more

"appropriate."

"I don't know how to be that Jesse anymore," he whispered. "The one who wasn't afraid to burn."

Anson kissed him, deep and claiming. "Yes, you do, Pretty Boy. He's right here. In my arms. Writing poetry with his bare skin against mine, so hot it's making these sheets *smoulder*…"

Jesse's breath caught at Anson's words, feeling the truth of them resonate deep in his bones. He could feel that old fire flickering to life inside him, a warmth he'd almost forgotten.

Jesse opened his mouth, unsure of what he wanted to say but finally letting his heart speak…

"I love you, Ans."

The old nickname slipped out naturally, and Anson's breath caught audibly. His eyes, usually so guarded, filled with tears. His hands cupped each side of Jesse's face.

"Say it again," he whispered, his voice rough. "Please."

"I love you." Jesse reached up to trace Anson's lips with his fingertips. "I love you, Anson Donovan. I never stopped. Not for a *single* fucking day."

Anson moved suddenly, rolling them so Jesse was beneath him again. His kiss was desperate, almost violent in its intensity, his tongue demanding entrance to Jesse's mouth. Jesse let him in, pressing his hands against the back of Anson's head trying to pull him in deeper.

"I love you," Anson breathed between kisses. "Always have. Always will. You're *it* for me, Pretty Boy. You're *everything*."

The words they'd both been too afraid to say ten years ago now flowed freely, each confession punctuated with kisses, with touches, with proof that this was real. That they were real.

"My body remembers this," Jesse whispered. "My flesh, my

bones…my. . .*soul* has been *begging* for you since the last time."

Anson's eyes darkened with desire. "Let me remind you," he growled, pinning Jesse beneath him. "Let me show you who you *really* are."

"Anson… please. *Please* take me where no one else ever could. Make me feel *nothing* but your heat inside me…"

Their bodies moved together with a desperate intensity, relearning familiar rhythms and discovering new ones. Jesse felt himself unraveling, all the careful control he'd built up over the years melting away under Anson's touch.

"That's it, Pretty Boy," Anson breathed against his skin. "Let go. Be wild for me."

And Jesse did. He let himself surrender completely, letting his carefully constructed walls crumble.

He didn't care who heard him moan Anson's name into the night as the bed underneath them squeaked exactly the same way it did when Anson took his virginity.

He arched into Anson's touch, gasping and moaning without restraint. His nails raked down Anson's back, leaving marks that would linger for days.

"Give it to me, Anson. Oh *yeah...* Make me see the stars."

"God, yes," Anson groaned. "*There's* my wild boy."

Jesse wrapped his arms around Anson's shoulders, and took in the moment. His eyes rolled into the back of his head as he felt Anson fill what had been empty for ten years

Their bodies moved together in perfect sync, finding that familiar rhythm. Jesse felt himself spiraling higher and higher, chasing a release that was about so much more than physical pleasure.

This was freedom.

This was coming *home*.

Jesse felt himself coming undone, piece by piece, until he was nothing but raw sensation and need.

"Ans," he gasped. "I'm—"

"Look at me," Anson demanded, his voice rough. "I want to see you fall apart."

Jesse's eyes flew open, locking onto Anson's intense gaze, and he wrapped his legs around Anson's waist.

The space between them filled with stars, and Jessie curled his toes.

"Oh my GOD!" Jesse cried. "Anson…please make me *burn*!"

In that moment, time seemed to stop. Past and present collided as Jesse saw the boy he'd fallen in love with and the man he'd become - all the pain, all the growth, all the love that had never truly died.

"I see you," Jesse whispered, his voice breaking. "I see all of you."

Something in Anson's expression cracked wide open. With a guttural groan, he buried his face in Jesse's neck as they both tumbled over the edge together. Wave after wave of pleasure crashed over them, intertwined with a bone-deep emotional release that left them both trembling and gasping.

As the aftershocks subsided, neither of them moved. Anson's weight was grounding, anchoring Jesse to this moment. To this reality where they had found each other again.

"I'm here," Anson murmured, his forehead pressed to Jesse's. "I'm not running away this time."

"Anson…." Jesse whispered into his love's ear. "I love you. I wish we could stay like this forever and ever…"

Afterward, they lay tangled together, sweat cooling on their skin. Jesse's head rested on Anson's chest, listening to the steady thump of his heartbeat.

"I forgot what it felt like," Jesse murmured. "To burn like that."

"Did you feel it in your toes?" His voice had that crooked smile sound to it.

"I felt it everywhere,' Jesse gasped.

Anson began to chuckle softly, but soon it turned into a deep, rumbling laugh. His laughter was intoxicating, and soon Jesse found himself joining in. It felt like they were dancing in this moment, their laughter a serenade and their passion the only music they needed.

For a precious moment, nothing else mattered except for the two of them. Not the outside world or any other obligations. Just the raw and all-consuming desire between them, burning like fire and holding them captive in its embrace.

Just them.

Just love.

Just truth.

* * *

They lay wrapped in each other, spent again, Jesse's head resting on Anson's chest. The steady thump of his heart was more familiar than any home Jesse had known since they'd parted.

Outside, the neon sign flickered, painting the room in pulses of red light. Jesse knew he should move, should check his phone, should do something other than melt further into Anson's embrace. But then Anson's fingers found his hair again, stroking softly, and time seemed to stop.

"Stay," Anson whispered into the darkness, his voice rough with emotion. The word held a decade of regret, of longing, of

promises he was finally ready to keep.

Jesse knew what he was really asking. Stay tonight. Stay tomorrow. Stay forever. Leave the carefully constructed facade behind and be real again. Be his again.

He should say no. Should get up, put his ring back on, go home to Ezekiel and their perfect life. Should forget tonight ever happened.

Instead, Jesse pressed closer, breathing in the scent of chlorine and cologne and truth.

"Okay," he whispered back.

And he stayed.

Stayed as the neon light painted their skin in shades of memory. Stayed as Anson's arms tightened around him like he was afraid Jesse might disappear. Stayed as Jesse relaxed muscles he'd been clenching since the day Ezekiel asked him to move in. Stayed as the night wrapped around them like a blanket, protecting their rekindled flame from the world outside.

For the first time in ten years, Jesse felt completely, utterly real.

7

BURNT BOY

Jesse woke to soft morning light and Anson's heartbeat under his ear. For one perfect moment, everything was right in the world. Then his phone, abandoned on the floor with his clothes, began to buzz.

"Let it ring," Anson murmured, pulling him closer. "Stay here with me."

Jesse buried his face in Anson's chest, breathing in the familiar scent of him. "I need to at least check—"

"No, you don't." Anson's lips found his temple. "You don't need to do anything except be here. Be real."

But the phone kept buzzing, insistent as conscience. With a sigh, Jesse untangled himself from Anson's arms and retrieved it.

The screen lit up with notifications:

27 Missed Calls from Ezekiel

12 Voicemails

143 Text Messages

"Jesus," Jesse breathed, scrolling through them.

***Darcy Quinn Show Producer**: *Car service confirmed for Friday morning. Excitement building for your segment!*

***LGBTQ Youth Center Detroit:** *Your love story is inspiring so many of our kids. Thank you for showing them it gets better.*

***@proudmama2024:** *My son came out to me after seeing your video. Thank you for giving him courage.*

***David:** *You and Ezekiel give me hope that my parents might accept me someday too.*

Messages poured in from strangers, each one a weight on Jesse's chest:

**Your proposal made me believe in love again*

**Finally showed my grandmother - she cried happy tears*

**Changed my mind about gay marriage*

**You two are living proof it gets better*

"Pretty Boy?" Anson sat up, the sheets pooling around his waist. "What's wrong?"

Jesse's hands shook as he opened a video link someone had shared. It was a teenage boy, eyes bright with tears: "I've been

so scared to come out, but seeing you and Ezekiel… you're heroes. You show that gay love can be beautiful and accepted and normal."

"Hey." Anson moved behind him, wrapping his arms around Jesse's waist. "Turn it off."

"I can't." Jesse's voice cracked. "Look at what we've done. What this story means to people."

"It's not real."

"But their *hope* is." Jesse turned in Anson's arms. "All these kids, these families… they believe in us. In what we represent."

"And that matters more than what's real?" Anson's eyes darkened. "More than this?"

"The Darcy Quinn show tapes in three days. It's going to reach millions. If I back out now, if I destroy this perfect love story they all believe in…"

"Then what? The world ends?" Anson's grip tightened. "You can't live a lie just to make other people feel better about their own lives."

Jesse's phone buzzed again.

Robbie: *You and Ezekiel give David and me something to show our parents. See? True love wins.*

"Fuck," Jesse whispered, tears burning his eyes.

"Stay with me," Anson said again, but this time it was a plea. "We'll figure it out. We'll tell the truth."

"The truth?" Jesse laughed bitterly. "That I cheated on my fiancé the day after our proposal went viral? That the man I really love used to beat up gay kids in high school? That'll really inspire hope."

"Jesse—"

"I have to go." Jesse stood, gathering his clothes with trembling hands. "I have to… I have to fix this."

"Don't." Anson caught his wrist. "Don't do this. Don't choose a lie over us. Not again."

Jesse looked at him – really looked at him. At the man he'd loved for more than a decade, at everything he'd ever wanted. Then he looked at his phone, at the messages still pouring in, at all the hope they'd accidentally created.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, and pulled away.

He dressed quickly, not trusting himself to look at Anson again. Not trusting himself to be strong if he saw the pain in those dark eyes.

At the door, he paused. "I love you," he said softly. "I'll *always* love you. But sometimes love isn't enough."

He left before Anson could respond, before his resolve could break. In his car, he pulled out his phone one last time:

To Ezekiel: *Sorry babe, fell asleep at the store working on my manuscript. Be home soon.*

The lie tasted like ashes in his mouth. But sometimes, he told himself, a beautiful lie was better than an ugly truth.

Even if it destroyed you in the process.

* * *

The drive home felt like moving through fog. Jesse's lips still tingled from Anson's kisses, his body ached in ways Ezekiel had never made it ache, and marks he'd have to hide bloomed across his skin. Each mile between him and Room 112 felt like another brick in a wall he was building around his heart.

His phone kept buzzing. He ignored it, knowing it was Anson. Knowing if he read even one message, he'd turn the car around.

Tears poured down his face, and like muscle memory, his mind forced him back to the last time his heart had been broken by Anson Donovan.

To senior prom night.

To blood and broken jaws and broken dreams.

To coming home to his mother…

Blood had soaked through the shoulder of his rented tuxedo by the time he made it home, Nikki's arm steady around his waist. His jaw throbbed with each heartbeat. The porch light was on – his mother always left it burning when he was out late.

"Let me do the talking," Nikki whispered, but Jesse was already pushing through the front door.

His mother looked up from her crossword puzzle, her reading glasses perched on her nose, the lavender scent of her hand cream mixing with the metallic smell of blood. The moment stretched between them as her eyes took in the blood, the swelling, the tears.

"Jesse?" Her voice cracked. "Baby, what happened?"

He broke then, collapsing into her arms like he was seven again, not seventeen. The truth poured out between sobs – about Anson, about secret kisses in the library, about fists and slurs and broken hearts in the school parking lot.

"I love him, Mommy," Jesse choked out. "I loved him and he hurt me and I'm gay and I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..."

"What's going on?" His father's voice boomed from the stairs. "What's all this racket?"

Jesse felt his mother's arms tighten protectively around him, her hand cradling the back of his head like she used to do when he was

small. But it was too late. Lloyd Valentine took in the scene... – his middle son crying in his wife's arms, blood on his clothes, Nikki Torres standing guard by the door.

"What did you say?" His father's voice was dangerously quiet.

"He said he's gay," Nikki spoke up, chin raised defiantly. "And if you have a problem with that—"

"Get out." The words fell like stones.

"Lloyd," his mother pleaded, "he's hurt, he needs—"

"I said get out!" His father's face had turned that dangerous shade of purple. "No son of mine is going to be a faggot under my roof."

"Then you won't have a son." Jesse's mother stood, positioning herself between them. For one glorious moment, Jesse thought she might actually choose him. But then his father grabbed her arm, and she crumpled like paper in rain.

"Sarah, don't." His father's voice softened for her, only for her. "Think of what people will say."

In the doorway to the living room, Noah stood rigid, eyes forward like a soldier at attention, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. But behind him, Kevin sobbed openly, his thirteen-year-old face twisted in confusion and grief, mouthing Jesse's name silently like a prayer.

"Jess..." Kevin started forward, but Noah caught his arm.

"Let me pack him a bag," Nikki said, her theater-trained voice steady despite the tears on her cheeks. "You can't send him out with nothing."

His father nodded curtly. Jesse watched Nikki run upstairs, heard her yanking open drawers, shoving clothes and books into his old duffel bag.

"Mom?" Jesse's voice cracked. "Please..."

But his mother wouldn't look at him. She stayed curved into his father's side, small and silent.

"Mrs. Valentine," Nikki pleaded as she came down the stairs. "You can stop this. You can choose your son."

"She's choosing her family," Lloyd Valentine said firmly.

"I am her family!" The words tore from Jesse's throat, raw and bleeding like his heart.

"Not anymore." His father's words were final as a coffin lid closing.

Nikki's hand found his, squeezing tight. "My parents already said you can stay with us. As long as you need."

Jesse looked one last time at his family – his father's stone face, his mother's averted eyes, Noah's rigid back, Kevin's tears. He wanted to memorize them, knowing somehow that this was the last time he'd see them all together.

"I love you," he said softly, not sure who he was talking to. Maybe all of them. Maybe none of them.

Then Nikki was pulling him out into the night, away from the porch light his mother always left burning, away from everything he'd ever known.

He never got to say goodbye to his mother properly. Never got to hug Kevin one last time. Never got to tell Noah it wasn't his fault.

The scholarship to Michigan State came a month later, addressed to the Torres household.

Jesse took it as a sign — a way out, a way forward.

He didn't look back.

But sometimes, late at night, he still dreamed of that porch light burning, waiting for a son who would never come home again.

The apartment building doorman's greeting jolted Jesse back to the present. "There's our celebrity! My wife cried watching your video."

Jesse managed a weak smile, touching his neck to make sure

his collar covered Anson's marks. The elevator ride felt endless, each floor bringing him closer to the lie he'd have to live.

Ezekiel was on the phone when Jesse walked in, pacing in his pressed suit, already dressed for work. His face lit up when he saw Jesse.

"He just walked in," he said to whoever was on the line. "Yes, we'll both be there. Thank you again." He hung up and pulled Jesse into a hug. "Where have you been? I was worried sick!"

Jesse breathed in Ezekiel's expensive cologne, so different from Anson's woodsy scent. "Sorry. Got caught up writing and fell asleep at my desk."

"You could have answered my calls." Ezekiel pulled back, studying his face. "You look… different."

"Just tired." Jesse tried to step away, but Ezekiel caught his hand.

"Your ring—"

"Oh." Jesse's stomach dropped. "It's… I took it off to write. Something about the metal against the keyboard…"

"Here." Ezekiel retrieved it from Jesse's pocket, where he'd shoved it before coming up. He slid it back onto Jesse's finger, the metal cold and heavy. "Perfect."

Jesse fought the urge to pull away as Ezekiel kissed him, trying not to compare it to Anson's passionate claiming of his mouth just hours ago.

"The Detroit Free Press will be here in eighty minutes for our interview. I'm going in to work late. Oh! The Darcy Quinn show called," Ezekiel said excitedly. "They're sending a car Friday morning. We're going to be their *featured* segment!"

"Great," Jesse managed.

"And look at this." Ezekiel grabbed his tablet, pulling up social media. "We're trending nationwide now. The Human

Rights Campaign wants us to speak at their gala next month. We're making a difference, babe!"

Jesse stared at the comments scrolling past:

#LoveWins

#RelationshipGoals

#TrueLove

**Finally showed my dad your video. He cried and hugged me for the first time since I came out.*

**My boyfriend proposed after seeing this! Love is contagious!*

Each message was another chain binding him to this path. Each hopeful comment was another reason he couldn't follow his heart.

His phone buzzed with another notification - his brother Kevin's art Instagram had liked then quickly unliked a photo of the bookstore. He'd been doing that for years, these slight gestures of connection that neither of them knew how to acknowledge. Noah was more direct - holiday cards with his return address clearly printed, invitations to his law school graduation that Jesse could never bring himself to accept.

His phone buzzed again. Anson.

"I'm going upstairs," Jesse said, pulling away from Ezekiel. "I'm going to shower."

"Make sure you're ready for 'The Free Press' interview!"

"I will be!" Jesse shouted back, trying to make his frustration sound like excitement.

Under the hot water, he finally let himself break. Let the tears fall as he watched Anson's marks begin to fade from his skin, washing away the evidence of genuine love in favor of a perfect fiction.

His phone lay on the bathroom counter, still buzzing with messages from the only man he'll *ever* love. Messages he knew he could never read.

Some fires weren't meant to burn forever. Some loves had to be sacrificed for a greater good.

Even if it killed you to put them out.

* * *

Jesse had just finished dressing when the doorbell rang. Through the bathroom door, he heard Ezekiel answer it, followed by a familiar voice that made his heart stop.

"Where *is* he?"

Nikki. Of *course* she'd come.

"He's getting—" Ezekiel started, but Nikki was already pushing past him.

"Jesse Valentine!" She burst into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. Her dark eyes blazed as she took in his appearance. "Oh god. You did it, didn't you?"

"Nik—"

"Don't 'Nik' me." She locked the door, lowering her voice. "I got on the first flight when you wouldn't answer my calls. I knew. I fucking knew you'd—" She stopped, reaching out to pull his collar aside, revealing one of Anson's marks. "Jesus, Jesse."

She pulled him close, her arms wrapping around him tightly as he allowed himself to finally let go and cry on her shoulder.

The fabric of her 'Wicked' t-shirt became damp with his tears, but she didn't mind. She held him steady, her hand rubbing soothing circles on his back as he released all the emotions he had been holding in for so long.

"I love him, Nikki," he cried into her shoulder.

"Oh, honey," she whispered, rubbing the back of his head. "I know you do."

"I had to come back," he whispered, tears threatening again.

"Had to?" She gripped his shoulders. "Or chose to?"

"You haven't seen the messages. The comments. All these kids looking up to us—"

"Fuck that." Her voice cracked. "You can't set yourself on fire to keep other people warm."

"Can't I?" Jesse's laugh was bitter. "Isn't that exactly what you do on stage every night? Give people the happy ending they need?"

"That's *theater*, Jesse. This is your *life*."

Through the door, they could hear Ezekiel on the phone, probably with another reporter. His voice was bright, practiced, perfect.

"He loves me," Jesse said weakly.

"But *you* love Anson." It wasn't a question. "Still. After everything."

"It doesn't matter."

"The hell it doesn't." Nikki grabbed his phone from the counter. "Call him. Tell him—"

"I can't." Jesse took the phone back, hands shaking. "Please, Nik. Don't make this harder."

She stared at him for a long moment, tears filling her own eyes. Then she pulled him into a fierce hug.

"You're going to destroy yourself," she whispered against his

hair. "And I'm going to have to watch it happen all over again."

Jesse held onto her like a lifeline, breathing in her familiar perfume. "Stay? Just… stay with me until the show tapes?"

"Of course." She pulled back, wiping her eyes. "Someone has to be around to call you on your bullshit."

A knock on the door made them both jump. "Babe?" Ezekiel called. "The Detroit Free Press is here for the interview."

Jesse met Nikki's eyes in the mirror as he straightened his collar, hiding the last visible marks of Anson's love.

"Show time," he said quietly.

Nikki squeezed his hand. "Just remember – the best actors know when to break character."

* * *

Room 112. Nikki stared at the number, remembering all the times she'd covered for them in high school. All the times she'd picked up the pieces after. She knocked three times, sharp and decisive.

No answer.

She knocked again, more vigorously.

"I know you're in there, Donovan! It's time you and I had a *long* talk!"

Still no answer.

"If you don't open this door, I swear to god, I will sit out here and sing show tunes at the top of my lungs until you go crazy!"

The door cracked open, revealing Anson's disheveled form. His eyes were bloodshot, his hair a mess

"What do you want, Nikki?" His voice was rough, defeated.

She pushed past him into the room, wrinkling her nose at the empty bottles strewn about. "Jesus, Donovan. You look

like shit."

"Thanks." He slumped onto the bed. "If you're here to yell at me, can we get it over with? I've got a date with Jack Daniels."

The room smelled like sex and heartbreak and missed chances. The unmade bed told its own story.

Anson looked exactly like she remembered and nothing like she remembered at the same time. Older, more solid, but his eyes still held that dangerous edge that had always drawn Jesse in like a moth to flame.

"How is he?" Anson asked quietly.

"Destroying himself." Nikki turned to face him. "Again. Because of you. *Again*."

"I didn't—"

"What? Force him to come here? No. You just waited until he was engaged, until he'd finally built something stable, then swooped in with your '*Hey there, Pretty Boy*' bullshit."

Anson flinched. "You don't understand."

"I understand everything." Nikki's voice cracked. "I was there, remember? I'm the one who drove him to the hospital that night. I'm the one who helped him lie about his broken jaw. I'm the one who watched him try to put himself back together after you chose your reputation over his love."

"I was scared—"

"And now? Are you still scared, Anson? Or just selfish?"

He sat heavily on the bed, running a hand through his hair. "I love him. Never stopped."

"I know." Nikki's anger softened slightly. "I'm sorry… I know you're going through hell, too. I *know* you love him. That's the tragedy of it all, isn't it? You've *always* loved him. You just never loved him enough to be brave."

"It's different now. I'm different."

"Is it? Are *you*?" She moved closer, studying his face. "Because from where I'm standing, you're still asking him to choose between love and duty. Still making him carry the weight of *your* choices."

"He loves me too." Anson's voice was rough. "I'm sure you saw the marks on him. That passion never died. It burned my path here. "

Nikki's eyes flashed. "Of course he loves you. He's always loved you. That's the problem."

She sat down next to Anson on the bed, her anger deflating. "To be completely honest…I was hoping *something* would stop him from marrying Ezekiel…but I *knew* the only thing that would stop him would be *you*," she admitted with a sigh. "Then I saw that video go viral and I held onto hope that if you truly loved him, you would reach out…and you did! But he thinks he has to sacrifice that love for some greater good." Nikki's voice cracked with emotion. "And you're letting him."

"What am I supposed to do? He chose to leave."

"You've seen him. You've had him. Are you going to let him go destroy himself, trying to be the hero everyone needs him to be?"

She looked deeply into Anon's eyes, and she saw the same boy there that her best friend loved with a passion that scared her when she was seventeen. In that moment, in her heart of hearts, she knew that it was in Anson Donovan's arms Jesse was meant to be.

"*Fight* for him." Nikki turned to face him. "Not like last time. Not with fists and fear. Fight for him by showing him it's okay to choose love over reputation. Show him you're finally brave enough to stand in the light with him."

"How?"

"The Darcy Quinn Show tapes in three days. After that, he'll be trapped in this lie forever."

Anson's eyes widened as understanding dawned. "You want me to go on national television and blow up his engagement?"

"I want you to give him a choice," Nikki corrected. "A real one. Not between love and duty, but between a beautiful lie and a messy truth."

"He'll *hate* me."

"Maybe." Nikki stood, smoothing her shirt. "But at least he'll be free to make his own decision without the weight of the world on his shoulders."

She walked to the door, pausing with her hand on the knob. "We have three days, Donovan. I can make this happen if you're serious."

Anson stared at Nikki, his mind racing.

"Trust me, Anson."

He knew at that moment that doing whatever she said would bring his Pretty Boy back to him.

"Okay," he said finally, his voice barely above a whisper. "I'll do it."

"Will Amber play ball?"

Anson's eyes widened at the mention of his ex-wife's name. "Amber? What does she have to do with this?"

"She knows about Jesse, right?"

Anson nodded slowly. "She… she's the one who eventually convinced me to reach out to him. Said she was tired of seeing me drink my life away."

"Give me her number," Nikki said firmly, handing Anson her phone. "We're going to need all the allies we can get if we're going to pull this off."

Anson reached for her phone with shaking hands. "What

exactly are you planning, Nikki?"

She grinned, a hint of mischief in her eyes. "Oh honey, I'm a theater kid. We're going to put on one hell of a show."

He laughed nervously, handing Nikki her phone back.

She opened the door, stopped, and placed a quick kiss on Anson's cheek before leaving.

Anson stared at the closed door long after Nikki left, her words echoing in his mind.

Fight for him. Show him you're brave enough. Give him a choice.

He stood, pacing the small room, mind racing. The thought of going on national television terrified him. But the thought of losing Jesse forever… that was unbearable.

* * *

Nikki's fingers flew across her phone screen, sitting in her rental car outside Room 112.

First, to Maria: *I need everything. All versions of his manuscript. Every draft where Marcus chooses Jason.*

Maria's response was immediate.

Maria: *You know which drawer in his desk. USB drive shaped like a book. What are you planning?*

Nikki: *The truth. You in?*

A pause. Then…

Maria: *Always. For Jesse.*

Next, Nikki took a deep breath, and pressed send to the contact

Anson saved into her phone.

Amber Donovan.

She rarely had interaction with Amber in high school, but they knew each other. She wondered if she'd remember her.

Nikki waited anxiously as the phone rang. On the third ring, a familiar voice answered.

"Hello?"

"Amber? It's Nikki Torres. From high school."

There was a pause. "Nikki… *Jesse's* friend? The theater girl?"

"That's me." Nikki took a deep breath. "I need your help. It's about Jesse and Anson."

Another pause, longer this time. "I was wondering when a call like this would come."

"So you know?"

"That Anson's still in love with Jesse? That he finally worked up the courage to reach out? Yeah, I know." Amber's voice softened. "Is Jesse okay?"

"No," Nikki said honestly. "He's not. And I think you might be one of the few people who can help fix this mess."

"What do you need me to do?"

Nikki blinked in surprise at Amber's quick agreement.

"Can you gather everything? Photos, texts, anything that shows their history. And your story - why you left."

"Because I got tired of being second choice to a memory." Amber's voice was bitter but not unkind. "Because our son deserved better than a father living a lie."

"Will you tell that story on national television?"

A long pause. "When and where?"

* * *

Nikki stared at the Darcy Quinn Show's website on her phone, noting the standard production contact number that would likely lead to nothing but automated menus and assistants. She smiled, remembering the stack of temp agency assignments on her desk - including the occasional clerical work she'd done for The Darcy Quinn Offices' administrative department. Time to put that connection to good use.

Instead of the main number, she dialed the internal extension she'd memorized from filing invoices just last month. When the familiar voice of the office coordinator answered, Nikki slipped into her most professional tone.

"Hi, Dara? It's Nikki Torres from Sterling Temps. I'm following up on some urgent paperwork regarding the Jesse Valentine segment - Sandra Bailey specifically requested I reach her directly about a time-sensitive issue with the story details."

The white lie rolled off her tongue smoothly. Within minutes, she was transferred past all the usual gatekeepers, her temporary employment history serving as the perfect cover for legitimate access.

"This is Sandra Bailey, lead producer."

"My name is Nikki Torres. I'm calling about your upcoming segment with Jesse Valentine and Ezekiel Hendricks." She took a deep breath. "How would you like the actual story? The one that'll make Darcy Quinn the most talked-about show in America?"

She could practically hear the producer leaning forward. "I'm listening."

"Your perfect engagement story? It's all a lie. And I can give

you the truth - complete with first love, violence, redemption, and a passionate reunion that happened the night *after* that proposal went viral."

"Go on."

"First loves who find their way back to each other after ten years? A famous gay engagement video star who's actually in love with someone else? That's not just a segment. That's a whole damn episode."

"We tape in three days."

"Perfect. Here's what I need…"

By the time Nikki hung up, the plan was in motion. She had one more call to make. Back to Room 112.

"Anson? Get ready. You're going to be on TV."

Because sometimes, Nikki thought, you had to destroy the fairy tale to get to the true love story underneath. And her history of temp work had just given her the perfect way in.

And she was about to blow it all up on live television.

* * *

After dropping off the papers with Nikki, Anson found himself at Amber's front door. She'd already agreed to help, but he needed to see Parker, to explain what Friday might mean. What Jesse might mean for all of them.

Amber answered his knock with knowing eyes. "He's in his room, working on something 'super important.'" Her air quotes held no mockery, only understanding. "I told him we were both going on TV tomorrow. He's ok with it."

"Thanks," Anson said softly. "For everything."

She squeezed his arm as he passed. "Just don't mess it up this time, okay? Parker's already planning family drawings."

Down the hallway, Anson found Parker at his desk, surrounded by colored pencils and crumpled sketches. His son's dark hair fell across his forehead just like Jesse's used to, making Anson's heart ache.

"Can't sleep, buddy?"

Parker shook his head, not looking up from his drawing. "I'm trying to get it right. For Jesse."

Anson moved closer, studying the artwork taking shape under Parker's careful hands. Two figures stood in what looked like a library, surrounded by books that floated like stars. One wore a leather jacket, the other held a poetry book.

"Is that…?" Anson's voice caught.

"It's you and Jesse. From the poems." Parker finally looked up, his eyes serious. "Mom said you're going on TV on Friday. That you might get him back."

Anson sat on the edge of Parker's bed, choosing his words carefully. "I'm going to *try*. But it might not work. Sometimes… sometimes when you hurt someone, even saying sorry isn't enough."

"But you *love* him," Parker said with the simple certainty of a child. "And he loves *you*. I can tell from the poems."

"How?"

Parker picked up one of his sketches – a dragon curled protectively around two knights.

"Because when I draw people in love, they look like his poems sound. Like they're scared but brave at the same time. Like they'd rather *burn* than be apart."

Anson's eyes stung. "When did you get so smart about love?"

"Maybe from watching you miss him all these years." Parker handed him the drawing. "I want you to take this tomorrow. Show him that some stories deserve happy endings."

Anson pulled his son into a tight hug, breathing in the scent of graphite and hope. "I don't deserve you, kid."

"Yes, you do." Parker's voice was muffled against his chest. "You taught me that love is worth being brave for. Now it's your turn to be brave."

They sat like that for a long moment, father and son, surrounded by art born from poems written by a boy who'd loved too deeply to stay safe.

"Dad?" Parker asked finally. "Will Jesse like me?"

Anson smiled through his tears. "Pretty Boy's going to love you. Almost as much as I do."

From the doorway, Amber watched them with a soft smile. "Bedtime, Parker. You've got school, and your dad needs his beauty rest so he can melt Jesse's heart on live TV."

"Just five more minutes? I need to finish the dragon's wings."

"The wings can wait," Amber said firmly, but her eyes were kind. "Love stories take time."

As Parker climbed into bed, Amber caught Anson's eye. "He's been drawing families all week. Dragons and queens. Princes and knights… all of us, together in our own way."

Anson tucked the drawing into his jacket pocket, next to Jesse's old poems. On Friday,, he'd show them both that some stories deserve second chances - not just for the princes, but for their whole messy, magical, *real* family.

8

WOODEN BOY

Another hot shower. It couldn't be hot enough. Jesse stood under the scalding spray, watching Anson's passion marks fade from his skin like watercolors in the rain. Each disappearing bruise felt like losing him all over again. His engagement ring sat accusingly on the counter - he couldn't bear to wear it in here, not when his skin still hummed with memories of other hands, other kisses, other truths.

Steam filled the bathroom, turning everything soft and dreamlike. If he closed his eyes, he could almost pretend he was still in Room 112, with Anson's arms around him and chlorine-scented promises on his lips.

His phone lit up through the fog. Another message from Anson. The twenty-third since he'd walked out. Or maybe the twenty-fourth. He'd stopped counting somewhere between "*Please, Pretty Boy*" and "*I can't breathe without you*."

The preview flickered across the screen: "These sheets still smell like…"

Jesse squeezed his eyes shut, but the words were already

branded into his mind, just as Anson had branded his touch into his skin. The marks would fade, but the memory of how they got there - Anson's mouth hot against his throat, whispering "Mine" between kisses - that would stay forever.

Someone knocked on the bathroom door. "Babe? The PR team is on line one."

Reality crashed back like a wave. Jesse quickly wrapped his neck with a scarf, praying the marks would fade before the TV show. His hand shook as he picked up the engagement ring, sliding it back onto his finger. It felt heavier now, like an anchor dragging him down into depths he wasn't sure he could survive.

The next two days passed in a blur of calculated performances. The Detroit Free Press in the morning, local news at noon, social media interviews squeezed between. Jesse smiled until his face hurt, held Ezekiel's hand through countless retellings of their "perfect" proposal, watched their video play on screen after screen until he could recite every moment like lines in a play.

"The car service will pick us up at eight tomorrow morning for Darcy Quinn," Ezekiel said, adjusting his tie in their bedroom mirror. "The show's stylist will have clothes waiting. They want us to look coordinated but not matching. Polished but approachable."

Jesse sat on their bed, watching his fiancé prepare for another appearance. Everything about Ezekiel was perfect - his pressed suit, his careful grooming, his measured excitement about their sudden fame.

"The producers sent over some talking points." Ezekiel handed him a folder, then paused, his hands lingering on his tie. "The firm's PR team is especially interested in this interview.

Thompson called it 'a golden opportunity.'" His laugh held an edge Jesse rarely heard. "Apparently being the first openly gay partner means I'm now the go-to for all things diversity and inclusion."

"Does that bother you?" Jesse asked carefully.

"Ten years of corporate law experience," Ezekiel's reflection met Jesse's eyes in the mirror, "but sometimes I think all they see is 'gay partner.' Perfect for the Phillips account because their CEO has a gay son. Perfect for the diversity committee. Perfect, perfect, perfect." His hands dropped from his tie. "My father warned me when I came out - said I'd have to be twice as polished, twice as professional, just to be taken seriously."

Something in his voice made Jesse's chest tighten. Suddenly, Ezekiel's obsession with their image made more sense.

"Is that why you're so focused on how we present ourselves?"

"One crack in the facade, one wrong move…" Ezekiel turned from the mirror, his usual confidence wavering. "I learned early: if you're going to be different, you better be flawless." His eyes softened as he looked at Jesse. "I know I can be… intense about appearances. But you understand, don't you? Why it matters so much?"

Jesse nodded, because he did understand. This was why they worked—they both knew what it meant to perform perfection. But while Jesse longed to break free, Ezekiel had built his armor stronger with each passing year.

"Maybe it doesn't have to be like that," Jesse suggested quietly.

"The Detroit Free Press will be here in an hour," Ezekiel said, his walls visibly rebuilding. "Let's review those talking points. Key themes: love at first sight, natural progression, traditional values in a modern context."

Jesse's hands shook slightly as he reviewed the talking points.

Ezekiel noticed immediately, setting aside his own notes.

"Hey," he said gently, taking Jesse's hands in his. "Remember when you had that panic attack before your first author reading? What did we do?"

"Breathing exercises," Jesse remembered. "You sat with me for an hour…"

"And I'll sit with you now. As long as you need." Ezekiel's smile was soft, genuine. "The interviews can wait."

Jesse nodded, grateful for Ezekiel's steadying presence. They sat together on the edge of the bed, Ezekiel guiding him through slow, deep breaths. As the panic ebbed, guilt rushed in to fill its place. Ezekiel was so good, so patient. He didn't deserve this betrayal.

"I'm okay now," Jesse said after a few minutes, forcing a smile. "Just pre-interview jitters."

Ezekiel squeezed his hand. "You've got this. America's going to fall in love with you, just like I did."

His phone buzzed again. Anson. Jesse's hands trembled as he turned it face down.

"You've been getting a lot of messages," Ezekiel observed, his voice carefully neutral.

"Just… fans. Of the video."

But they both heard the lie in his voice. The space between them felt like an ocean, and Jesse was drowning in unspoken words.

The Detroit Free Press interview was supposed to be soft. Human interest, feel-good, a sidebar in the weekend edition about love in the Motor City. The reporter was young, sharp-eyed, hungry in the way that new journalists are hungry—looking for the angle that would make the piece more than just another viral recap.

They sat in the living room of the apartment Ezekiel had staged like a magazine spread: fresh flowers, strategically placed books, the engagement photo already framed on the mantle. Jesse wore the blue sweater Ezekiel had picked out. His hair was freshly cut. He looked the part.

The first fifteen minutes went exactly as rehearsed. How they met (the gallery opening—Ezekiel told it better, with the kind of practiced charm that made even the truth sound like a press release). How long they'd been together (three years, though Jesse always had to stop himself from adding *and four months, not that I'm counting the days*). What the proposal meant to them (everything Stephanie Chen and the Morgan Stanley PR team had suggested, polished until it gleamed).

Then the reporter leaned forward.

"So, Jesse—your family. I understand your father is Lloyd Valentine, who was pretty active in his church community back in Hamtramck. Has he reached out since the video?"

The air in the room changed. Jesse felt it in his sternum—a tightening, a contraction, the way the body braces a half-second before impact. His mouth opened, but nothing came out. His mind flashed to the deleted text message, to *she's barely cold in her grave,* to the sound of a door slamming shut when he was seventeen.

Ezekiel's hand found Jesse's knee under the table. Not a squeeze. Not a signal. Just contact. *I'm here.*

"Jesse's relationship with his family is private," Ezekiel said. His voice was pleasant. His smile didn't waver. But something behind his eyes had gone cold and precise, like a blade being drawn from a velvet sheath. "And it's not what this interview is about."

The reporter pressed. They always pressed. "But the public

is curious about the full picture. A lot of LGBTQ+ couples navigate complicated family dynamics, and your story could—"

"Our story," Ezekiel interrupted, and now the pleasantness was gone. What replaced it was the voice Jesse had only heard him use in depositions—quiet, measured, and absolutely lethal—the voice that said *I have been underestimated in rooms far more important than this one, and you would be wise not to repeat the error.* "Our story is about two people who love each other. That's the piece your editor approved. If you'd like to write a different one, I'd suggest a different couple."

A beat of silence. The reporter's pen hovered over her notepad.

"Of course," she said, recalibrating with the practiced smoothness of someone who knew when a door had closed. "Let's talk about the video itself. Whose idea was it to film?"

Ezekiel's hand stayed on Jesse's knee. His thumb moved once—a small, slow circle—and Jesse felt the tightness in his chest ease just enough to breathe.

It wasn't until later, after the reporter had packed up and Ezekiel was on the phone with Stephanie reviewing how the interview had gone, that Jesse sat alone in the bathroom and tried to name what he'd felt in that moment. Not gratitude, exactly. Not relief.

Safety.

That was Ezekiel's gift. Not passion. Not abandon. Not the reckless, drowning, burning thing that Jesse craved the way addicts crave the needle. Ezekiel offered something steadier than that, something built to last: the assurance that when the world bared its teeth, someone would step between Jesse and the bite.

And Jesse hated himself for knowing it wasn't enough.

He hated himself more for knowing that in two hours, he'd be sneaking glances at his phone, rereading a message from a man who had never once made him feel safe—who had, in fact, been the most dangerous thing that had ever happened to him—and his heart would be racing in a way that Ezekiel's steady, shielding love had never once achieved.

Through the bathroom door, he could hear Ezekiel wrapping up the call. "Yes, I think it went well. No, she won't run the family angle—I made that clear. Jesse was great. He's always great."

A pause. Then, softer, as if Ezekiel thought Jesse couldn't hear: "No, I'm not worried about the Darcy Quinn appearance. Jesse knows what's at stake. We both do. This isn't just about us anymore—it's about everyone watching. Every kid who needs to see that this is possible."

And there it was again. The shift. From *Jesse was great* to *what's at stake.* From the man who'd shielded him from a reporter's cruelty to the man who was already framing that moment as a media win. Ezekiel's love was a pendulum that swung between genuine tenderness and strategic calculation, and the tragedy—the real, gutting tragedy that Jesse didn't yet have the words for—was that Ezekiel didn't see a difference between the two. To him, protecting Jesse and managing the narrative *were the same act of love.* The fortress and the PR plan were built from the same blueprints, by the same hands, with the same desperate conviction: *if I make this perfect enough, nothing can hurt us.*

Jesse pressed his forehead against the cool tile and closed his eyes.

Some loves, he thought, were cathedrals. Grand and beauti-

ful and built to withstand centuries. You could shelter in them. You could be awed by them. You could spend your whole life inside one and never feel the rain.

But you couldn't breathe in a cathedral. Not really. Not the way you could breathe standing in an open field with the wind in your hair and the sky pressing down on you, wild and indifferent and endless.

His phone buzzed against the counter. He turned it over.

Anson*: I saw the interview. You looked like you were drowning.*

Jesse stared at the message. His pulse hammered in his throat.

Anson*: I always could tell. Even when nobody else could.*

And that was the difference, wasn't it? The whole terrible, aching, unfixable difference. Ezekiel saw the reporter and moved to protect. Anson saw the same interview and moved to *see.* Ezekiel built walls. Anson burned them down. And Jesse, standing in the wreckage with his heart in his hands, still couldn't figure out whether he needed to be saved or set free.

Someone knocked on the bathroom door. "Babe? The PR team is on line one."

Reality crashed back like a wave.

At Dapple & Mays, the circus continued. Jesse posed for photos with customers, each flash like a spotlight on his lies. He signed books with "Love is love" while his heart screamed otherwise. Every time the door chimed, his pulse jumped, half-hoping, half-fearing it would be Anson.

Maria set down his latte, frowning at her phone. "Weird.

Nikki just asked me for the store's media contact list. Something about cross-promotion with her theater?"

Jesse shrugged, too lost in his own turmoil to notice the way Maria studied him before typing back a response.

"Your brothers called the store," Maria said quietly. "*Both* of them. Noah said something about your mother's last letter. Kevin just cried."

Jesse sighed and closed his eyes. He couldn't take anymore.

"Maria, *please*…"

"I know, I know," Maria said, her voice softening. "I told them you were swamped with interviews. But Jesse… they're worried. We all are."

Jesse nodded, unable to meet her eyes. He felt like a house of cards. One wrong move from collapsing entirely.

"Your manuscript's been sitting untouched," she said as he sipped the latte. She'd added an extra shot of vanilla - her way of saying she knew something was wrong. "Marcus and Jason still frozen mid-choice?"

Jesse stared at his laptop screen, cursor blinking accusingly.

Marcus watched Jason climb out of the pool, water streaming down muscles that hadn't changed in ten years. His engagement ring felt like handcuffs, like choices already made, like lies already told...

He slammed the laptop shut. Even his characters were betraying his secrets now.

"You're going to break," Maria said, watching him arrange books with shaking hands. "You can't keep this inside forever."

"I have to." His voice cracked. "You've seen what this story means to people. The hope it gives them."

"And what about *your* hope?" She touched his arm. "What about your *truth*?"

Jesse looked at her, walls crumbling. "Maria, I—"

His phone buzzed. Ezekiel, reminding him about the show tomorrow.

The moment passed, walls rebuilding brick by brick.

The bell above the door chimed again, and Jesse's heart leapt into his throat. But it was just another customer, browsing the new releases display.

Not Anson.

Not salvation or damnation wrapped in broad shoulders and a crooked smile.

"Just remember," Maria said as she turned to leave, "Sometimes the *truth* is worth burning everything down."

That night, sleep wouldn't come. Ezekiel's arm draped across his waist felt like an anchor, holding him to a life he wasn't sure he wanted anymore. The bedroom was perfect - tastefully decorated in grays and blues, everything in its place. Just like their relationship. Just like their lies.

His phone glowed on the nightstand. Twenty-seven unread messages from Anson.

When sleep finally claimed him, Jesse dreamed of drowning in chlorine-scented waters, of library books raining down like autumn leaves. He dreamed of Anson's hands pulling him under, of Ezekiel's perfectly pressed suits turning to stone and weighing him down.

He woke gasping, sheets tangled around his legs. Ezekiel slept peacefully beside him, unaware that in Jesse's dreams, he'd been calling another man's name.

Careful not to wake him, Jesse slipped out of bed and into the living room. Nikki was still awake, curled on the couch with her laptop.

"Can't sleep?" she asked, not looking up.

"What are you working on?"

She closed her laptop quickly, shifting into director mode. "Well, don't you look like the poster child for poor life choices."

Her phone kept buzzing with notifications, but she ignored them, focusing entirely on Jesse. That should have been his first clue - Nikki never ignored her phone during production season.

"You should read them, Jesse."

"Nik—"

"Read them, Jesse." Her voice was gentle but firm. "Before tomorrow. Before you go on national television and lie about the greatest love story ever told."

"Our engagement isn't—"

"I wasn't talking about your engagement."

Jesse sank onto the couch next to her, his heart heavy. "It's not that simple, Nik. Ezekiel is… he's good for me. Stable. Reliable."

"And boring as hell," Nikki muttered.

"He's not boring," Jesse protested weakly. "He's just… predictable."

Nikki raised an eyebrow. "Is that what you want? Predictable?"

Jesse closed his eyes, memories of Anson flooding back. The wild adventures, the passionate fights, the make-up sex that left them both breathless and aching for more. It had been intense, all-consuming. Terrifying.

"I don't know what I want anymore," he whispered.

"I do," she said with a smirk.

"Nikki…" Jesse's voice hardened slightly. "It's been ten years. In all that time, you've been saying 'you deserve better,' 'it's his loss,' and 'I will never forgive him for what he did to you.' Now

suddenly, you want me to go back to him?"

Nikki set her laptop aside with a sigh. "Because I've watched you these past few days, Jess. I've seen the way you flinch every time your phone buzzes. The distant look in your eyes when Ezekiel talks about your future. How you touch that spot on your neck where Anson used to bite and drive you crazy."

Jesse's hand instinctively went to that spot on his neck, and he couldn't help but giggle.

"Three years with Ezekiel, and he never found that spot," Nikki said softly. "Did he?"

Jesse's hand dropped from his neck like he'd been burned. "No. And when I was with Anson the other night. . .it was like fireworks inside my body. No, not fireworks… dynamite. He makes every nerve in my body dance. It was…electric," Jesse finished, his voice barely above a whisper. "Like every cell in my body was awake for the first time in years."

Nikki nodded, a knowing look in her eyes. "And with Ezekiel?"

Jesse's shoulders slumped. "It's…" He sighed, frustrated and defeated. He dropped his voice to a soft whisper, "Recently, I can only 'get there' if I picture Anson."

Nikki's eyes grew wide. "Is that enough?"

The question hung in the air between them, heavy with implications. Jesse's gaze drifted to his phone, still lit up with unread messages from Anson.

"I don't know if I can do it, Nik," he said, his voice cracking. "Go on that show tomorrow, smile for the cameras, and pretend that what I have with Ezekiel is this grand love story. Not when I know what real passion feels like."

Nikki reached out, squeezing his hand. "Then don't."

Jesse stared at her, heart pounding. "What do you mean,

'don't'?"

"I mean just what I said: Don't go on the show. Don't keep pretending. Don't settle for a life that doesn't set your soul on fire."

Her words hung in the air between them, electric with possibility. Jesse's mind raced, imagining the fallout. The disappointment in Ezekiel's eyes. The media frenzy. The betrayal their "fans" would feel.

But beneath all that, a tiny spark of hope flickered to life.

"I can't just…" he started, but the words died on his lips.

Nikki's phone buzzed again. This time, she glanced at it, a slow smile spreading across her face.

"What?" Jesse asked, suddenly wary.

"Nothing," she said, too quickly. She reached for Jesse's phone. "Maybe these will help you figure out what it is you want." She stood, pressing his phone into his hands. "Read them. I need to take this call. I'm going for a walk."

After she left, Jesse sank onto the couch, phone heavy in his trembling hands. He opened the messages:

**Pretty Boy, please.*

**I can't sleep. The sheets still smell like you.*

**Remember that poem you wrote about stars being scars in the sky? It's been in the pocket of whatever pants I was wearing that day since you wrote it..*

**Parker asked about you today. Said he saw the video. Asked if you were the boy from the poems.*

**I told him yes. Told him you were the bravest person I've ever*

known.

**Until now. Because now you're being a coward. Just like I was.*

**He said all his best art comes from thinking about the boy who made his dad write about stars.*

**Pretty Boy, please. Don't do this. Don't choose safe over real.*

Jesse's vision blurred with tears as he scrolled through message after message, each one more desperate than the last. The final one had come just hours ago:

**I love you. I've loved you since I was seventeen and scared and stupid. I love you now, at twenty-nine, finally brave enough to say it out loud. And I'll love you tomorrow, when you go on that show and pretend what we have isn't real.*

**But I can't watch you do it.*

**Goodbye, Pretty Boy.*

The phone slipped from Jesse's hands as sobs wracked his body. He pressed his face into the couch cushions to muffle the sound, but it was too late.

"Jesse?" Ezekiel's voice came from the bedroom doorway. "Babe? What's wrong?"

And for the first time in their relationship, Jesse couldn't find his perfect smile.

"Jesse?" Ezekiel moved closer, concern etched on his perfect features. "Talk to me."

For one wild moment, Jesse wanted to confess everything. About Anson. About Room 112. About how every kiss they'd shared since the proposal had tasted like betrayal.

Instead, he wiped his eyes and reached for the nearest lie. "Just… overwhelmed. The show tomorrow, all these people counting on us…"

"Oh, babe." Ezekiel sat beside him, adjusting Jesse's collar automatically, smoothing away invisible wrinkles. "You know what my father said when he saw our video? 'Finally, Ezekiel. A partner who represents the firm's values.'" He laughed softly. "Three years I've been molding you into exactly what they wanted to see, and now…"

Jesse stiffened slightly. "*Molding* me?"

"Come on, Jesse. The wild-haired bookstore dreamer I met at that gallery opening? The one in that ratty cardigan who talked too loud about poetry?" Ezekiel's voice was gentle but firm. "You needed… *polishing*. Direction. Just like I did when I first started at the firm."

"Why don't you ever read anything I write?" The question slipped out before Jesse could stop it.

The late-night silence stretched between them. Ezekiel looked up from his phone, and Jesse braced himself for the usual deflection—the gentle smile, the change of subject, the patient non-answer that was itself an answer.

But Ezekiel set his phone down.

"Actually," he said, "I did."

Jesse's heart lurched. "What?"

"Last week. While you were at the store for that late inventory night." Ezekiel shifted to face him, tucking one leg beneath him on the couch—a gesture so casual, so un-Ezekiel, that Jesse felt a wild, irrational surge of hope. "I read the first

six chapters. Got through the pool scene, the library, the part where Marcus finally tells his mother."

Jesse's mouth went dry. The pool scene. The pool scene. Where Marcus watches Jason climb out of the water, droplets catching the late afternoon sun, and realizes with the quiet devastation of a man who has been lying to himself for years that he would ruin his entire life for one honest kiss. Maria had called it the best thing Jesse had ever written. He'd bled onto those pages. He'd woken at 3 AM to write it because the words wouldn't let him sleep, and when he'd finished, his hands had been shaking and his face had been wet and he'd known, with a certainty that terrified him, that Marcus wasn't fiction.

And Ezekiel had read it.

For one breathless, vertiginous moment, Jesse thought: He knows. He read it and he saw me in it and he knows.

"You have real talent, Jesse."

The words landed like sunlight after a week of rain. Jesse felt his chest open, felt something loosen behind his ribs that he hadn't even realized was clenched. Ezekiel thought he had talent. Ezekiel had read it. After three years of coffee-stained pages stuffed into messenger bags and 4 AM writing sessions conducted like a secret affair, Ezekiel had finally opened the door to the room where Jesse kept his real self, and—

"But I have some notes."

Ezekiel reached for his phone. Not the couch cushion, not Jesse's hand, not the manuscript itself. His phone. He pulled up the Notes app, and Jesse saw, with a sensation like the floor tilting beneath him, a numbered list. Neat. Organized. Bullet-pointed.

"First thing—your timeline's off in chapter three. Marcus is supposed to be sixteen in the flashback, but you reference a

song that came out in 2019, which would make him at least eighteen. Small thing, but a copy editor would catch it." Ezekiel scrolled. "Also, there's a comma splice on page forty-one that keeps recurring. I flagged a few of them. It's a stylistic thing, I know, but publishers might see it as carelessness."

Jesse stared at him. The hope that had cracked open in his chest was doing something strange now—not closing, exactly, but hardening. Calcifying. Turning into something he could feel but couldn't name.

"And honestly?" Ezekiel looked up from the list, and his expression was engaged, animated, interested in a way Jesse had never seen him look when discussing the writing before. "I think you're burying the hook. You open with the library—Marcus shelving books, the quiet, the internal monologue. It's beautiful writing, don't get me wrong, but it's slow. If you moved the pool scene to chapter one—opened with the water, the physicality, the tension—you'd grab the reader in the first three pages."

He said this the way he said everything: with conviction, with clarity, with the absolute certainty of a man who had been trained to identify the strongest argument and lead with it. And the worst part—the part that made Jesse want to scream—was that he wasn't wrong. Structurally, commercially, strategically, it was good advice.

It was also the most devastating thing Ezekiel had ever said to him.

Because Jesse hadn't opened with the library by accident. He'd opened with the library because that was where it started—not the desire, not the heat, but the knowing. Marcus in the stacks, fingers tracing spines, the fluorescent hum overhead, and Jason rounding the corner with a stack of books

he'd never return, and their hands brushing over a copy of Giovanni's Room, and Marcus thinking, with the devastating simplicity of a truth arriving fully formed: Oh. There you are. I've been waiting for you and I didn't even know it.

That was the scene Jesse had written and rewritten forty times. That was the scene he'd cried over. That was the scene that was real—not because two boys touched in a pool, but because two boys recognized each other in a library, and everything after that was just gravity.

And Ezekiel wanted to cut it.

Not out of cruelty. That was the thing. Not even out of indifference. He wanted to cut it because he'd read the pool scene and thought: this is the product. He'd read Marcus watching Jason rise from the water, dripping with light and chlorine and longing, and he'd thought: this is what sells.

He'd read Jesse's soul and come back with market positioning.

"And have you thought about the YA angle?" Ezekiel continued, warming to his subject now, his business voice fully engaged. "Two boys, coming of age, the sports element with the swimming—there's a real gap in the market right now. Especially with the visibility we've gotten from the video. If you timed the submission right, rode the wave of the press coverage, you could pitch this to a mid-tier publisher within the year. I could even talk to Stephanie about media tie-ins."

Jesse heard himself say, "It's not YA."

"Well, not yet. But with some adjustments—tone down a few of the more explicit scenes, age up the framing, add a content warning—"

"It's not YA, Ezekiel."

Something in Jesse's voice made Ezekiel stop. He looked

up from his phone, and for a moment his face was genuinely puzzled—the expression of a man who had offered a gift and couldn't understand why the recipient was looking at him like he'd broken something.

"I'm not trying to change your vision, babe. I'm just saying—you have something here. Something real. Why not give it the best chance to succeed?"

Succeed. The word sat between them like a stone dropped into still water. Jesse knew what Ezekiel meant by succeed. He meant published. He meant reviewed. He meant a number on a royalty statement and a spine on a shelf at Barnes & Noble and a talking point for future interviews: my fiancé is a published author. He meant the version of Jesse's dream that could be framed and hung on a wall.

He didn't mean the 3 AM crying. He didn't mean the shaking hands. He didn't mean the way Jesse's heart felt like an open wound every time Marcus said the thing Jesse couldn't.

"Did you like it?" Jesse asked. His voice came out smaller than he intended. Younger. The voice of the boy in the library, not the man on the couch.

Ezekiel blinked. "Like it?"

"The story. Marcus and Jason. When you read the pool scene, when you read Marcus realizing he'd ruin everything for one honest moment—did you… did it make you feel anything?"

The pause lasted only a second. But Jesse felt it the way you feel a crack spreading through ice beneath your feet—slowly, and then all at once.

"I thought it was very well written," Ezekiel said carefully. "The imagery is strong. Visceral. You have a real gift for sensory detail."

Sensory detail.

Jesse almost laughed. He'd written a scene about a boy drowning in love so consuming it was indistinguishable from grief, and Ezekiel had admired the sensory detail. He'd read about Marcus's hands trembling on the bleachers and thought: nice use of physicality. He'd read about the chlorine and the light and the devastating moment of recognition and come away thinking about comma splices and market gaps and the YA demographic.

It wasn't that Ezekiel didn't care. Jesse could see, in the earnest way he held his phone, in the careful list he'd made, in the genuine enthusiasm behind his strategic suggestions, that Ezekiel cared deeply. He'd sat down with Jesse's manuscript and given it the same focused attention he gave his most important cases. He'd done his due diligence. He'd come prepared.

He'd read the whole thing and missed the entire point.

Because the point was never the pool. The point was never the water or the muscles or the tension. The point was that Marcus had been standing in a library, quietly dying inside a life that looked perfect from the outside, and someone had walked around a corner and seen him—not the performance, not the polish, just the raw, terrified, wanting him—and that single moment of being seen had ruined Marcus for every safe choice he would ever make.

Ezekiel had read that. And recommended a stronger hook.

"You're upset," Ezekiel said, studying Jesse's face with the same careful attention he'd given the manuscript. Reading the room the way he read depositions—looking for the argument, the angle, the thing he could fix. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to come across as critical. I genuinely think it's strong work, Jesse. With the right positioning—"

"Please *stop* saying *positioning*."

Ezekiel went quiet. In the silence, Jesse could hear the hum of the refrigerator, the distant sound of traffic, the soft tick of the clock Ezekiel had chosen because it matched the apartment's color scheme. The whole room was so carefully curated. Every object selected for how it looked, how it functioned, how it fit into the larger design. Even the bookshelves—Jesse's bookshelves, the one corner of the apartment that was supposed to be his—had been organized by color rather than by author, because Ezekiel said it was more visually cohesive.

"What do you *want* me to say?" Ezekiel asked, and the question was sincere. He wasn't being defensive. He wasn't withdrawing. He was sitting on their couch at midnight, asking Jesse to help him understand, and the sincerity of it was so much worse than dismissal would have been.

I want you to say it broke your heart, Jesse thought. I want you to say you read about Marcus watching Jason in that water and you understood that it was us—that it was about all the ways a person can love someone and still be invisible to them. I want you to say you cried. I want you to say it kept you up at night. I want you to say you saw me in it.

What he said was: "Nothing. It's fine. You're right—the timeline thing in chapter three *is* a mistake. I'll fix it."

Ezekiel watched him for a long moment, and something moved behind his eyes—not comprehension, exactly, but the awareness that he'd missed something. The awareness without the understanding. Jesse had seen this look before: the small furrow between Ezekiel's brows, the slight tilt of his head, the way his lips parted as if he were about to ask a follow-up question in a meeting and then decided the answer wasn't material to the outcome.

"Come back to bed," Ezekiel said softly. "Big day tomorrow."

Jesse let himself be led back to their bedroom. He stayed in the bathroom a little too long, staring at his reflection in the mirror. There was a light knock.

"Jesse? Come to bed, babe."

When he came out, his manuscript was waiting on the nightstand. Not the dog-eared, coffee-stained pages from his messenger bag. A new copy—printed and bound, the cover smooth and professional, the spine crisp and unbroken. His favorite chamomile tea steamed beside it in the mug Ezekiel had bought him last Christmas, the one with the Hemingway quote Jesse had never had the heart to say he found reductive.

"I know you like to read through your work before bed when you're stressed," Ezekiel explained. He was already under the covers, but he looked up from his tablet with an expression Jesse hadn't expected—almost shy. Uncertain, even. As if the gesture had cost him something. "I had it bound at the print shop on Lafayette. Even if I don't always… understand everything you're trying to do with it, I understand that it *matters* to you. I wanted it to look like what it is. Something *real*."

Jesse's throat ached.

Because it *was* thoughtful. It was so *goddamn* thoughtful he could have wept. Ezekiel had gone to a print shop. He'd chosen the binding. He'd probably specified the font weight and the paper stock, because Ezekiel specified everything, because that was how Ezekiel loved—through logistics, through execution, through the painstaking assembly of a perfect container for whatever mattered to the person he cared about.

But a container was all it was.

Jesse picked up the bound manuscript and felt the weight of

it—heavier than the dog-eared draft in his bag, sturdier, more permanent. The cover was smooth where his working copy was wrinkled. The pages were clean where his were coffee-stained and tear-blotted and marked with 3 AM confessions in the margins. Ezekiel had taken the rawest thing Jesse had ever created and made it presentable.

He flipped it open. The words were the same. Every comma splice Ezekiel had flagged was still there, every timeline error, every scene that needed a stronger hook. But the pages felt different in his hands. Sanitized. The binding held them prisoner in a way the loose pages never had. His working draft could be reshuffled, rearranged, torn apart and reassembled at 4 AM when inspiration struck like a fever. This version was fixed. Finished. Final.

The raw emotion that had driven him to write about Marcus and Jason's forbidden love—the love that tasted like chlorine and library dust and the inside of a boy's wrist—had been smoothed away. Not by Ezekiel's edits. By his packaging. By the simple, devastating act of turning a wound into a product.

Leaving behind something…

Safe.

Acceptable.

Marketable.

Just like Jesse in his pressed shirts and scheduled haircuts and color-coordinated bookshelves. Just like their apartment, their relationship, their viral proposal. Just like everything Ezekiel touched—made beautiful, made professional, made ready for the world to admire.

Made unrecognizable to the person who'd created it.

"Thank you," Jesse said, because he meant it. Because the gesture deserved gratitude even if it had broken something

inside him that he didn't yet have the language for.

Ezekiel smiled, satisfied, and settled into bed with his tablet. "Don't stay up too late reading. We need to be fresh for tomorrow."

Jesse nodded absently, his gaze drawn back to the window.

In the reflection, he could see Ezekiel scrolling through work emails, already absorbed, already elsewhere. And he could see himself—holding a bound copy of his own heart and knowing, with a clarity that felt like falling, that the man who'd packaged it so beautifully had never once felt the pulse inside.

Jesse nodded absently, his gaze drawn back to the window. In the reflection, he could see Ezekiel scrolling through work emails, while his own eyes looked haunted, searching for something just out of reach.

His phone buzzed one final time. The message preview made his heart stop: ***Goodbye, Pretty Boy. I won't watch you lie tomorrow.***

The garment bag containing his TV show outfit hung on the closet door like a question mark. Jesse traced the words on his phone screen, understanding with sudden clarity that tomorrow would change everything. One way or another, this perfect lie was about to end.

His fingers hovered over Anson's messages, still unread. Still waiting like time bombs to detonate his carefully constructed life. Outside, the city was beginning to wake, the first hints of dawn painting the sky in shades of promise and regret.

Today, he would smile and laugh and tell America about his perfect love story. Tomorrow he would choose safety over passion, duty over desire, lies over truth.

But now, in his perfect bedroom in his perfect apartment, Jesse Valentine pressed his fingers to the last visible mark

of Anson's love and let himself remember what drowning in starlight felt like.

Just one more dawn of truth before the lies became his air.

9

SHOW BOY

JESSE

The Darcy Quinn Show's green room was smaller than Jesse had imagined. On television, these rooms always looked spacious, glamorous—places where confident people sat in plush chairs and sipped sparkling water before stepping into the light. This one was closer to a dentist's waiting room: muted blues and grays, a coffee table with a bowl of untouched mints, a mirror ringed with bulbs that cast the kind of brightness that forgave nothing.

Jesse sat perfectly still while a makeup artist touched up his face, her fingers quick and professional against his cheekbones. The stylist had dressed him in a soft blue sweater that made him look younger, more innocent. Perfect for their fairy tale. In the mirror, his reflection looked like a stranger auditioning for the role of himself.

His phone lay silent in his pocket. No more messages from Anson. The silence was worse than the twenty-seven unanswered texts had been. At least when Anson was reaching out, Jesse could tell himself there was still a thread connecting

them, still a line he hadn't yet severed. Now there was just the void. Goodbye, Pretty Boy. The last message sat in his phone like a headstone.

Ezekiel sat beside him in the other makeup chair, reviewing their talking points one last time. His posture was impeccable, his suit jacket draped across the arm of the chair with the kind of deliberate casualness that probably took him ten minutes to arrange. His notes were printed, tabbed, color-coded. Of course they were.

"Remember," Ezekiel said, not looking up, "when she asks about the proposal, mention how traditional values can exist in modern love stories. And if she pivots to the political angle—she will, her producers love a pivot—we redirect to the personal. Keep it warm. Keep it human."

Jesse nodded. His hands were in his lap, and he was pressing his thumbnails into the pads of his fingers, one by one, the small sharp pain a metronome keeping time against the rising tide in his chest.

The makeup artist stepped back. "All done. You look great."

Jesse looked at himself in the ringed mirror. He did look great. That was the problem. He looked like a man about to tell America a beautiful love story, and the face staring back at him was so convincing that for one vertiginous second, he almost believed it himself.

Then his hands started to shake.

It began the way it always began—in the fingers first, a tremor so fine it was almost invisible, like a hummingbird's wing. Then it climbed. Through his wrists, up his forearms, into his shoulders, until his whole body was vibrating at some terrible frequency, every muscle locked in a trembling that was not quite panic and not quite grief but something older

and deeper than both. The room shrank. The lights went too bright. His chest closed like a fist.

He thought of his father. She's barely cold in her grave. He thought of the teenagers recreating their proposal, the boy in Iowa crying, David clutching his hot chocolate, the elderly woman in the 7-11 squeezing his hand. He thought of every person who had looked at the video and seen hope, and how in thirty minutes he was going to sit across from Darcy Quinn and feed them a story built on a foundation of ash.

His breathing went wrong. Too fast, too shallow, the air coming in but not reaching anywhere useful, his lungs filling and emptying and filling and emptying without ever actually providing oxygen. He gripped the arm of the makeup chair, and the mints on the coffee table blurred, and the room tilted like a ship in a storm.

"Jesse."

Ezekiel's voice came from very close. Jesse hadn't seen him move, but suddenly the notes were gone, the color-coded tabs abandoned, and Ezekiel was crouched in front of him—crouched, in his twelve-hundred-dollar suit, on the green room floor, his knees against the thin carpet, his hands finding Jesse's and holding them steady.

"Hey. Look at me."

Jesse couldn't. His eyes were darting—door, mirror, phone, door—looking for the exit, the escape, the trapdoor in the floor that would drop him out of this life and into any other one.

"Jesse. Eyes on me. Just me."

The voice was firm but not hard. An anchor, not a command. Jesse's gaze found Ezekiel's face, and something in it made the shaking slow—not stop, but slow. Ezekiel's eyes were brown and warm and absolutely unwavering, the same eyes that had

found Jesse across Jaime's gallery three years ago and decided, with that terrifying Ezekiel certainty: You. I choose you.

"Remember the author reading?" Ezekiel said, his thumbs tracing slow circles on the backs of Jesse's hands. "Your first one. At the bookstore."

Jesse remembered. God, he remembered. Twenty people in folding chairs, and he'd been so terrified he'd locked himself in the storage room and called Ezekiel, gasping into the phone like a man going under for the third time.

"What did we do?" Ezekiel asked.

"Breathing exercises," Jesse managed. The words came out ragged, half-formed.

"And what else?"

Jesse closed his eyes. "You sat with me."

"For how long?"

"An hour."

"An hour and twelve minutes," Ezekiel corrected, and the ghost of a smile crossed his face. "I counted. I sat on the floor of that storage room with you for an hour and twelve minutes, between the toilet paper and the industrial cleaner, and you read me every poem you'd ever written, and I didn't understand half of them, and I didn't care. Because my job wasn't to understand the poems. My job was to be the floor under your feet until you were ready to stand."

Jesse's throat constricted. A different kind of tightness now—not panic, but the terrible pressure of being loved by someone you are actively betraying.

"We don't have an hour and twelve minutes," Jesse whispered.

"Then we'll use what we have." Ezekiel squeezed his hands. "In through the nose. Count of four. Hold. Out through the mouth. Count of six. With me. Ready?"

He counted. Jesse breathed.

When the tremor finally left Jesse's hands, Ezekiel didn't release them immediately. He held on a beat longer than necessary, his thumbs stilling against Jesse's knuckles, and said:

"Good. You're good."

The way he said it — the slight emphasis, the quiet approval — was the same voice he used when Jesse wore the right jacket to a firm dinner, or stood up straight during a gallery opening, or remembered not to order the messy pasta at a client lunch.

Well done.

Jesse had long ago stopped noticing the tone.

Today it landed like a splinter finding its way to the surface.

In through the nose. One, two, three, four.

Hold.

Out through the mouth. One, two, three, four, five, six.

The room stopped tilting. The lights dimmed to their actual brightness. Jesse's hands steadied, and the tremor retreated to wherever it lived when it wasn't consuming him, and Ezekiel stayed exactly where he was—on the floor, in his beautiful suit, holding Jesse's hands like they were the only thing in the world that mattered.

"There you are," Ezekiel said softly. "There's my Jesse."

My Jesse. Not America's Jesse. Not the Jesse from the video. Not the Jesse who represents the firm's values. Just mine.

Jesse wanted to scream. He wanted to shake Ezekiel by the shoulders and say: *How can you be this? How can you be this kind, this patient, this steady, and I still*— But the sentence had no ending that didn't destroy them both.

"What if they ask about my family?" Jesse's voice cracked on the last word.

Ezekiel didn't stiffen. Didn't deflect. Didn't reach for his notes or mention media strategy or remind Jesse about key themes and talking points. He just stayed on the floor and looked up at Jesse with those steady brown eyes and said:

"Then we handle it together."

The word together landed in the room like a bell being struck.

"If she asks about your father, I'll step in. If she asks about your mother, you tell her whatever feels true. If you freeze—if it gets too much—you squeeze my hand twice and I'll redirect. I'll talk about the firm, the proposal, the engagement party—whatever buys you time to breathe." He paused, and his voice dropped to something private, something meant for no one else in the world. "You will not be alone out there, Jesse. I won't let that happen."

Jesse stared at the man kneeling in front of him. The man who organized their lives like case files and scheduled their love like billable hours. The man who had replaced Jesse's bookshelves and rewritten his wardrobe and gently, persistently, lovingly sanded away every rough edge until Jesse gleamed.

The man who was, right now, in this terrible little room with its too-bright lights, the safest thing in Jesse's world.

"And afterward," Ezekiel added, standing now, brushing off his knees with the kind of automatic neatness that made Jesse's heart hurt, "we're getting ice cream from that place you love. The one with the ridiculous sprinkle selection that makes absolutely no culinary sense."

Jesse almost laughed. It came out as something closer to a sob.

"The salted caramel one?"

"With the sprinkles that taste like nothing and cost four dollars extra. Yes." Ezekiel smoothed a nonexistent wrinkle from Jesse's sweater, his hand lingering on Jesse's chest for just a moment—right over his heart.

"You're going to be brilliant, you know. You always are. You walk into a room and people just… lean toward you. Like you're a fire they want to warm their hands on."

Jesse blinked. In three years, Ezekiel had never said anything like that.

"You don't usually talk like that."

"I know." Ezekiel's smile was small and slightly embarrassed, the smile of a man who had just overdrawn on an emotional bank account he usually kept in strict balance. "I'm not good at the… poetry part. The big feelings. You know that. But I see it, Jesse. I see what you do to people. The way that kid David looks at you like you're proof that things get better. The way Mrs. Chen lights up when you critique her chapters. The way Maria would walk through fire for you and pretends it's just because you make a good latte."

He paused, and his voice went very quiet.

"The way I look at you when you don't notice. When you're reading in the armchair with your hair doing that thing it does, and you're so far inside a book that the whole world could catch fire and you wouldn't flinch." He cleared his throat, suddenly self-conscious. "I should have told you that more. I should have said it instead of just… scheduling it. Planning around it."

The guilt hit Jesse so hard his vision went white.

Because this was real. This wasn't the PR voice or the media strategy or the fortress with its drawbridge and its moat. This was Ezekiel, stripped of his armor for thirty seconds, standing in a green room in a suit that cost more than Jesse's car, telling

him that he watched him read. That he saw the curl in his hair. That he knew about David and Mrs. Chen and Maria. That he had been paying attention all along, in his own quiet, organized, impossibly Ezekiel way—cataloguing the evidence of Jesse's goodness the same way he catalogued everything, meticulously, methodically, and with far more love than he'd ever learned how to say out loud.

I don't deserve you, Jesse thought, and the thought had a double edge so sharp it cut in both directions: I don't deserve your steadiness, and you don't deserve my betrayal, and the distance between those two truths is the exact shape of everything that's wrong with my life.

"Thank you," Jesse said. And he meant it with every fractured piece of his heart.

Ezekiel nodded once—short, almost military, as if the vulnerability had reached its permitted duration and the drawbridge was rising again. He smoothed his own lapels, checked his cuffs, reached for his notes. The transformation took less than five seconds. The man who'd just knelt on the floor was gone, replaced by the polished professional who would sit across from Darcy Quinn and charm thirty million viewers.

Then, almost as an afterthought, Ezekiel straightened Jesse's collar with two precise fingers, adjusted the lay of the fabric at his shoulder.

Not roughly. Not unkindly.

The way you'd straighten a picture frame on a wall you'd already hung perfectly, just to be certain.

"The sweater reads a little young on camera," he said, almost to himself. "But the stylists know their job." He said it with the tone of a man who had already assessed the stylists and found

them acceptable.

Jesse thought: *I liked this sweater before you said anything about it.* He didn't say it

But Jesse had seen him. Had seen the real Ezekiel, crouched on the carpet, counting breaths, his voice steady as a heartbeat.

This, Jesse thought. *This* is why I stayed three years. *Not* the apartment. Not the *stability*. Not the *firm* or the *suit* or the *ring*. *This*. The man on the floor. The one who doesn't know how to say *"I love you"* without a game plan, but who will kneel in a green room and count to six as many times as it takes.

And then, with the kind of clarity that only arrives when it's too late to be useful: And this is why leaving him is going to be the worst thing I've ever done.

Jesse stood. His legs held. The shaking was gone—not buried, not suppressed, but genuinely quieted, because Ezekiel's steady hands and steady voice had done what they always did. Made the ground solid. Made the world survivable. Made Jesse brave enough to walk into the fire.

He just didn't know yet that the fire would consume everything.

NIKKI

Backstage was controlled chaos, exactly how Nikki liked it. She watched the production assistants scurry around, watched the producers huddle with Darcy Quinn herself, watched her plan tick forward like a perfectly timed theatrical cue.

"Everything's set," Sandra Chen, the lead producer, whispered. "Amber's in the secondary green room. The manuscripts and poems are ready. Are you sure about the timing?"

Nikki nodded, thinking of Jesse's tear-stained face last night.

"Trust me. I know my audience."

Nikki's phone buzzed. A text from **Noah Valentine**: ***We're here. Green room 3 like you said. Are you sure about this?***

She typed back quickly: ***Trust me. He needs you there. Just watch from the monitors. I'll come get you when it's time.***

Kevin's message came next: ***Is he really going to do it? Choose himself?***

If I have anything to say about it, Nikki replied. Stay ready.

She pocketed her phone, heart pounding. Getting Jesse's brothers here had been the hardest part of the plan. Finding their contact information through old high school connections, convincing them that their little brother needed them, that today was the day everything would change. Noah had been skeptical; Kevin had cried on the phone. But they'd both agreed to come.

They deserved to see Jesse choose truth. And Jesse deserved to know his family had been waiting for him all along.

JESSE

"Five minutes!" A PA stuck her head in the door. "Ms. Quinn would like a quick word before you go on."

Darcy Quinn was exactly as Jesse remembered from TV - tall, elegant, with kind eyes that seemed to see right through you. She swept into the green room like a perfectly coordinated whirlwind.

"Jesse, Ezekiel!" She hugged them both. "I cannot tell you how excited we are to have you. Your story… it's going to be unforgettable."

Something in her tone made Jesse's stomach twist.

NIKKI

From her spot in the wings, Nikki could see everything. The way Jesse's hands shook slightly as he adjusted his sweater. The way Ezekiel kept touching his notes like a security blanket. The way Darcy Quinn's eyes sparkled with the knowledge of what was about to unfold.

"Places everyone," Sandra called softly. "Show starts in two minutes."

Nikki touched the folder in her hands - Jesse's manuscript, his poems, the truth about to explode across national television.

"I'm sorry, Jesse," she whispered. "But sometimes love needs a little *dramatic intervention*."

JESSE

The audience's applause felt like thunder as they walked onto the set. Ezekiel's hand was warm in his, their practiced smiles perfect as they took their seats across from Darcy.

"We're here today," Darcy began, "to share a love story that has captured America's heart."

Jesse's chest tightened. In his pocket, his phone remained silent.

The cameras rolled.

Darcy smiled at the camera with the particular warmth of a woman who had done this ten thousand times and still made it feel like the first.

"But before we hear from Jesse and Ezekiel directly," she said, "we wanted to share some voices from their world. The people who have watched this love story unfold up close."

The studio lights dimmed. The screen behind Darcy's set flickered to life.

Jesse felt Ezekiel's hand find his in the dark — automatic, certain, the hand of a man who had never once considered that the ground might not hold.

Jesse let him hold it.

CUT TO:

A dorm room. Paperbacks stacked on a shelf. A young man in a good hoodie leaning slightly forward, earnest and slightly terrified.

DAVID BUNTON — *Bookstore Regular, Age 19*

"Jesse is — okay, so, I know this sounds dramatic, but Jesse Valentine is the reason I didn't drop out of school sophomore year. I used to go into Dapple and Mays just to, like, *exist* near someone who made the world feel less overwhelming. He never made me feel like a burden. He'd just — he'd hand me a book and say *this one* like he already knew what I needed before I did."

His expression went soft with memory.

"When I heard about the engagement I cried. Happy crying. Because Jesse deserved someone who would show up for him the way he shows up for everyone else." A beat. "I hope — I really hope that's what this is."

BACK TO STUDIO:

A ripple of warmth moved through the audience. Someone in the third row pressed a hand to their chest.

Beside Jesse, Ezekiel smiled — the composed, gracious smile of a man receiving confirmation of something he already knew. He gave Jesse's hand a small squeeze. *You see? This is what we are to people.*

Jesse smiled back. The smile cost him something.

CUT TO:

The Dapple & Mays back office. Jesse's space — the cluttered desk, the shelf of overstuffed binders, the reading lamp with the slightly bent neck. A woman sat in the center of it all like she owned it, which in every way that mattered, she did.

NIKKI TORRES — ***Jesse's Best Friend, Actress, Theater Director***

"Jesse Valentine is the most gifted, most generous, most catastrophically self-sacrificing person I have ever had the privilege of loving."

She smiled, and it was a real smile, warm and slightly dangerous, the smile of a woman who contains multitudes and knows it.

"He would give you the last chapter of a book he hadn't finished reading yet if he thought you needed it more than he did. He has been doing that his entire life. With his time, with his talent, with his heart."

She paused, letting that land.

"Ezekiel Hendricks is a very impressive man. I mean that sincerely. He is organized and capable and completely, utterly certain of everything he has ever decided, which, if you know Jesse, you understand the appeal of. Jesse has spent his whole life feeling like a question mark. Ezekiel looks at him like he's an answer."

Another pause, fractionally longer.

"The thing about answers, though, is that they tend to shut down the conversation. And Jesse Valentine is not a man who should ever stop asking questions. His questions are the best thing about him. His questions are where all the poetry lives."

She looked directly into the camera, and for just a moment the warmth in her eyes sharpened into something else entirely — the look of a woman standing at the edge of a decision she has already made.

"I want Jesse to be happy. I have wanted that since we were seventeen years old and he was writing love poems in the margins of his English homework and pretending he wasn't. I have wanted it every single day since." She smiled again, softer now, and unmistakably sad. "I just want to make sure that what he calls happiness is actually happiness. And not just — the relief of finally being still."

She glanced briefly off camera, as though checking something. Then back.

"He deserves the real thing. That's all I'll say." A beat. "He has always deserved the real thing."

BACK TO STUDIO:

The audience was quieter this time. Not cold — thoughtful. The particular silence of people who have heard something that almost landed as a compliment and aren't quite sure why it didn't.

Jesse felt it move through the room like a change in air pressure.

He did not look at Ezekiel. He looked at his own hands, folded in his lap, and thought: *She knows. She has always known. She is saying goodbye to the lie right now, on national television, and she is doing it in a language only I can hear.*

Ezekiel leaned slightly toward him. "Nikki's wonderful," he murmured, pitched low enough for only Jesse. "Very articulate."

Jesse nodded. Said nothing.

In the wings, somewhere Jesse couldn't see, Nikki would be watching the monitor. He knew, without needing to look, exactly what expression would be on her face.

CUT TO:

A banking firm conference room. Glass, steel, the specific beige of institutional power. A woman in a perfectly constructed blazer sat with her hands folded on the table, composed in the way of someone who has never once said more than she intended.

PATRICIA CALLOWAY — Managing Director, Hendricks & Calloway

"Ezekiel Hendricks is the finest financial mind this firm has produced in two decades. His judgment is impeccable. His instincts for risk are — well. When he makes a decision, he makes it completely. He commits."

A slight pause.

"When he told us about Jesse, I'll admit there were questions. The lifestyle gap is significant. A bookstore. Creative writing." The words were not unkind, exactly. They were precise. "But Ezekiel was certain. And when Ezekiel is certain about something, you learn to trust that."

Another pause, longer this time.

"He had a vision for what Jesse could become. What they could build together. That kind of clarity of purpose is — it's rare. It's what makes him exceptional."

She smiled at the camera. The smile of a woman who believed every word she'd just said, and had no idea what any of it revealed.

BACK TO STUDIO:

Ezekiel sat straighter. There was a quiet pride in it, involuntary and unguarded, the only unguarded thing about him since they'd walked on stage. He released Jesse's hand briefly to adjust his cuff.

Jesse watched him and thought of Patricia's voice: *He had a vision for what Jesse could become.*

He thought of his bookshelves, reorganized while he slept.

He thought of the sweater, and the comment about the stylists, and the way Ezekiel's thumb had pressed once into his palm not twenty minutes ago: *Stay on script.*

He pressed his thumbnail into his finger. One, two, three, four.

In the audience, he could see several faces that hadn't settled back into warmth after Patricia's segment. People exchanging glances. A woman in the fourth row with her head tilted very slightly, like a person trying to locate a sound they couldn't quite place.

CUT TO:

A kitchen table. A coffee mug in both hands. A woman who had clearly decided, before the camera started rolling, exactly how much of the truth she was going to tell, and then decided to tell slightly more.

MARIA RODRIGUEZ — Lifelong Friend & Coworker, Dapple & Mays

"Jesse Valentine has been my best friend since we were seven years old. I want to start with that, because I need people to understand that I am not a coworker with an opinion. I am the person who held him while he cried at sixteen and drove four hours to pick him up from a gas station at two in the morning when he was twenty-three and didn't ask a single question

until he was ready to answer them."

She paused.

"I know every version of Jesse that has ever existed. And I have watched, for three years, while the man I love like a brother slowly and very politely disappeared inside a life that fit Ezekiel perfectly and fit Jesse like a coat one size too small."

She took a sip of her coffee.

"Ezekiel is — he's very competent. He's very organized. One year he flew Jesse to London for his birthday, which, points for that." A beat. "He also once rearranged Jesse's bookshelves alphabetically by author while Jesse was at work and didn't mention it for three days because he thought he was doing Jesse a favor."

She looked directly at the camera.

"Jesse had those shelves organized by *feeling*. By what book needed to live next to what other book. He spent six years on that system." She set her mug down. "Ezekiel genuinely could not understand why that mattered. And Jesse — Jesse just relabeled them and didn't say anything, because that's what Jesse does. He makes himself smaller so other people can be comfortable."

Something moved across her face — the expression of a woman who has said more than she planned to, and has decided she's not sorry about it.

"I just want Jesse to be *big*. You know? I want him to take up the space he deserves."

BACK TO STUDIO:

The audience had shifted. Jesse could feel it — the collective lean, the quality of attention changing from warm to intent. Several people were no longer watching the screen. They were

watching Jesse.

He kept his face very still.

Beside him, Ezekiel had gone quiet in a new way. Not the composed quiet of a man at ease, but the quiet of a man who has heard something he is deciding how to categorize. His jaw was set at a fractional angle that Jesse recognized — the angle it took when he was processing something and had chosen not to respond to it yet.

Jesse did not look at him.

He makes himself smaller so other people can be comfortable.

The words sat in the studio air like smoke after a match.

CUT TO:

A living room. A man sitting slightly stiff in an armchair, the posture of someone talking about family on camera for the first time, choosing each word like he's crossing a frozen lake and testing the ice as he goes.

NOAH VALENTINE — Jesse's Brother

He shifted in his seat, and there was something careful in it — the particular care of a man navigating a wound that hasn't fully closed.

"Jesse and I haven't spoken in about ten years. That's — that's on me, mostly. Things were said, or not said, when he needed them said, and I didn't — I wasn't who he needed me to be at the time."

He exhaled slowly.

"So I want to be clear that I'm not someone who has the right to speak about his day-to-day life. I don't know Ezekiel. I've never been in a room with them together. What I know is Jesse. Who he was growing up, and who he's always been underneath whatever version of himself he was showing the

world at any given moment."

A small, careful smile.

"Jesse's always been the sensitive one. The writer. Growing up, he felt everything so loud, you know? While the rest of us were watching baseball, Jesse was reading, or out by the creek writing in one of his notebooks. We weren't always the best at understanding that. At making space for it."

He looked at his hands briefly.

"I found out about the engagement the same way the rest of the world did. A video on my phone. Thirty million views." He laughed quietly, but there was nothing easy in it. "My little brother got engaged and I watched it happen on a four-inch screen while I was eating lunch."

He was quiet for a moment.

"That's not a criticism of Jesse. That's just — that's where we are. Where I let us get."

He looked at the camera, and his eyes were honest and slightly pained.

"But I watched that video maybe a dozen times. Looking for him in it. The real him." A pause. "And I kept thinking — he looks like a man who is very grateful. And gratitude is a beautiful thing. But it's not the same as joy. Jesse knows the difference. He's always known the difference. He just sometimes needs someone to remind him that he's allowed to want the second thing."

He shook his head slowly.

"He's never needed someone to take care of him. He's needed someone to *see* him. There's a difference. Jesse would want you to know there's a difference."

BACK TO STUDIO:

Jesse's breath had stopped somewhere in the middle of Noah's segment and hadn't fully returned.

My little brother.

He hadn't heard Noah's voice in ten years. He'd forgotten the particular timbre of it, the way it dropped slightly on certain words, the way it sounded like their father's voice and not like it at the same time. He hadn't known — hadn't let himself know — how much he'd missed it until it filled a television studio and landed somewhere behind his sternum like something coming home.

His eyes were burning. He blinked once, twice, pressed the burn back down.

Ezekiel's hand found his again. Automatic. Warm.

Jesse didn't squeeze back.

In green room three, he knew, Noah was watching a monitor. Watching Jesse watch him on a screen. Ten years of silence in the same room at last, separated by cameras and studio lights and everything neither of them had known how to say.

Jesse pressed his thumbnail into his finger until the burning receded.

CUT TO:

An artfully bare wall. A man in a beautifully cut jacket, the kind of person who understood instinctively that how you present yourself is its own form of language.

JAMIE OKAFOR — *Artist, Gallerist & Mutual Friend*

"I introduced them. At one of my openings, which is — yes, I take full credit, thank you." He laughed. "The chemistry was immediate. Ezekiel walked in and saw Jesse standing in front of one of the pieces, and I watched him just — *recalibrate*. Like he'd come in with one agenda and found a better one."

His expression warmed.

"And Jesse was so flustered. He knocked over a glass of wine and turned the color of a stop sign and Ezekiel just — handed him a cocktail napkin and introduced himself like it was the most natural thing in the world. Like he was already certain."

A pause, something gentler moving through his expression.

"I always thought they were good for each other. Ezekiel gave Jesse *gravity*, you know? Kept him tethered. And Jesse gave Ezekiel — he softened him. Made him human in rooms where he usually isn't."

He was quiet for a moment.

"Though I suppose the question is whether tethered is the same as *grounded*. I think about that now. Whether there's a difference."

BACK TO STUDIO:

The screen faded to black.

The studio lights came back up, warm and full, and for a moment the only sound was the quiet settling of an audience that had collectively heard several people accidentally say the same true thing in five completely different languages.

Jesse blinked against the brightness. He felt exposed in a way that had nothing to do with the cameras — as though the montage had peeled something back, layer by careful layer, until what was left sitting in the chair was not Jesse Valentine, viral sensation, happy fiancé, love story — but just Jesse. The real one. The one Maria had driven four hours for. The one Noah had watched on a four-inch screen, looking for.

Beside him, Ezekiel had watched the whole thing with his spine perfectly straight and his expression composed, the face of a man receiving a performance review he expected to ace.

He squeezed Jesse's hand once — *we're doing well* — and turned his smile back toward Darcy.

Jesse thought of Maria's voice. *He makes himself smaller so other people can be comfortable.*

He thought of Noah — Noah, who hadn't spoken to him in ten years, sitting in his living room saying *he's never needed someone to take care of him. He's needed someone to see him.*

He thought of Patricia Holloway saying *Ezekiel had a vision for what Jesse could become* in the tone of someone describing an excellent quarterly return.

He thought of Nikki glancing off camera. The ghost of what she was already doing.

He pressed his thumbnail into the pad of his finger. One, two, three, four.

"Beautiful," Darcy said warmly, to the audience, to the cameras, to the two men sitting across from her with their hands interlaced. "Simply beautiful." She leaned forward, and her smile was the smile of a woman who knows exactly where this is going. "So tell us — how did you two meet?"

The cameras rolled.

Showtime.

Ezekiel launched into their practiced story about Jaime's gallery opening, his voice easy and charming, every word landing exactly where they'd rehearsed it. Jesse nodded at all the right moments, squeezed Ezekiel's hand on cue. The audience sighed appreciatively at all the perfect details. And for a few minutes — three, maybe four — Jesse let himself be carried by it. By the story. By the practiced warmth of Ezekiel's voice and the familiar shape of the narrative they'd built together. It wasn't even hard, at first. He'd told this story before: dinner parties, firm events, Diane's incredulous delight.

The words existed in his mouth fully formed. All he had to do was let them out.

He could do this. He was going to be fine.

"And Jesse," Darcy turned those penetrating eyes on him. "Was it love at first sight?"

Jesse opened his mouth to deliver his rehearsed answer, but the words caught in his throat. He could feel Ezekiel's expectant gaze, the weight of the audience's collective breath held in anticipation. His mind flashed to Anson's face that first night at the bookstore, the way starlight had reflected in his eyes.

"I thought it was," he said, and the words came out before he could dress them properly, before he could sand the edge off them, and he heard the slight wrongness of it immediately — the past tense, the *thought*, the fractional hesitation that preceded it.

Ezekiel's hand tightened on his. A warning.

"You *thought* it was?" Darcy's eyebrow arched. "That's an interesting way to phrase it."

"I mean—" Jesse scrambled, and he could feel his pulse in his temples, the particular heat of almost-exposure, of a lie nearly caught in the light. "It *was*. It *is*. I just meant — he *surprised* me. The feeling surprised me. You don't always recognize love when it first arrives. I thought that's what made it beautiful." He glanced at Ezekiel as he said it, and something in his face must have been convincing, because the audience gave a small collective murmur of approval, and Ezekiel's grip softened back to warm.

"He's being modest," Ezekiel said smoothly, the professional charm sliding into place. "Jesse's a writer. He overthinks *everything*, especially his own feelings."

The audience laughed gently. Jesse laughed too. The laugh sounded real. He was almost proud of it.

"A writer," Darcy said. "That's right. You work at Dapple & Mays bookstore, and you're working on a novel?"

"Yes," Jesse said, grateful for safer ground. "I've been working on it for years."

"Tell me about it. What's it about?"

"It's a love story," Jesse said carefully. "About two men who meet when they're young. They fall in love, but circumstances pull them apart."

"How tragic," Darcy said. "Do they find their way back to each other?"

"I'm still working on the ending." He smiled as he said it — a self-deprecating, literary shrug — and several people in the audience laughed.

"Interesting," Darcy said. "Ezekiel, have you read Jesse's book?"

"Bits and pieces," Ezekiel said. "Jesse's very private about his work."

"Is that true, Jesse? Are you private about your writing?"

"I — yes, I suppose so."

"Why is that?"

Jesse's fingers curled once in his lap before he smoothed them flat again. "It's personal. The characters come from a *personal* place."

"*All* good writing does," Darcy agreed. "But there's personal, and then there's *personal*, isn't there? The kind of personal that reveals truths we're not ready to face."

The audience was quiet now. Jesse felt the first cold finger of premonition trace his spine, but he kept his face pleasant, his posture open. He had practiced this too, in the mirror, in

his head, in the sleepless geography of 3 AM: the face of a man with nothing to hide.

"Let me ask you something, Jesse. In your novel, when these two men are separated — *why* did they split up? What came between them?"

"Fear," Jesse answered before he could stop himself. Then he breathed, steadied, added: "And circumstance. The world they were living in wasn't ready for them. It wasn't — safe."

He glanced at the audience as he said the word *safe*, the way he'd been trained to make eye contact, to invite empathy, and he watched a woman in the fourth row nod in recognition.

See, he told himself. *You can do this. You're doing it.*

"And when these two men meet again later in life," Darcy continued, "what happens?"

"They have to decide if they're the same people they were. If they've grown." Jesse held his voice perfectly steady. "But in the version I'm currently working on — the finished version — the protagonist moves forward. He chooses the life he's built. Because the past is beautiful, but it's still the *past*."

He felt Ezekiel's hand relax in his. Felt the small, private squeeze of approval.

There, Jesse thought, with something that might have been relief or might have been grief dressed as its twin. *There. We're fine.*

Ezekiel's thumb found Jesse's palm and pressed once — not the unconscious comfort of earlier, but something coded, deliberate.

Stay with me. Stay on script.

Jesse pressed back.

Yes. He knew. He had always known what was expected of him, had learned the grammar of Ezekiel's silences and

pressures the way you learn the layout of a house you've lived in long enough — the stairs that creak, the door that sticks, the rooms you do not enter without permission.

"Fascinating," Darcy said, and she said it the way a doctor says *interesting* when they've found something on the scan. "Ezekiel, does it ever make you jealous? Jesse spending his days writing about old loves?"

"It's *fiction*," Ezekiel said. "I'm secure enough in our relationship not to be threatened by imaginary characters."

"Of course." Darcy smiled. "Though I imagine it must be strange, being engaged to someone who spends their days writing about someone *else's* great love story." A pause. "Or *is it* someone else's?"

Jesse kept his face perfectly, absolutely still.

"Let's talk about the proposal," Darcy said, pivoting so smoothly Jesse nearly staggered with the whiplash. "Ezekiel, it was quite the viral moment. Tell us about planning it."

Ezekiel relaxed almost imperceptibly, back on familiar terrain. He talked about the planning, the timing, Nikki's involvement, and Jesse sat beside him and nodded and smiled, and the audience was warm and delighted, and Jesse thought: *I am going to get through this*. He thought it with conviction. He thought it the way you tell yourself the ground will hold, as you feel it beginning to shift.

"Jesse," Darcy said, turning back to him. "When Ezekiel proposed — in that moment, what did you feel?"

"Surprised," Jesse said. And then, because surprise alone had almost tripped him before, he added quickly: "Moved. I felt — the enormity of it hit me all at once. It's one of those moments where you understand that your life is changing, and you can't quite catch your breath." He turned to Ezekiel as he said it,

and his voice was soft, and everything in his face was true — because that part was true. He *had* been unable to catch his breath. The rest was just architecture around a real feeling. "This man chose *me*," Jesse said. "In front of *everyone*. And I felt the full weight of that."

Ezekiel's eyes were warm. His thumb traced the back of Jesse's hand.

The audience exhaled.

Darcy let the moment sit. Then: "When did you know Ezekiel was *the one*, Jesse?"

He had an answer prepared for this. They'd even rehearsed it: *I knew when he stayed. I knew when he sat on that storage room floor. I knew when the world fell apart and he didn't.* All of it was true. All of it was real. He opened his mouth.

And nothing came out.

Not because he couldn't access the words — they were right there, loaded and ready — but because in the moment of reaching for them, he saw Ezekiel watching him with those steady brown eyes, and the warmth in them was so complete, so unguarded, so *real*, that the lie turned to ash in his mouth. He couldn't dress it in performance. Couldn't make it charming. Couldn't make thirty million people nod along.

The silence stretched one beat too long.

"Take your time," Darcy said, her voice kind.

"He makes me feel safe," Jesse said finally. And it was true. That was the agony of it — it was completely true.

"Safe," Darcy repeated. Not cruelly. Almost gently. "Not *passionate*? Not *alive*? Not like you can't breathe when he walks in the room?"

"That's not—those are fairy tales," Jesse said. "Real love is about partnership. Stability—"

"Is it?" Darcy interrupted gently. "Or is that what we tell ourselves when we're settling for something comfortable instead of something true?"

The audience gasped softly.

Ezekiel sat up straighter. There was a new quality to his attention now — not alarm exactly, but the careful alertness of a man who has noticed the weather changing and hasn't yet decided if he should be concerned. He turned to look at Jesse with something that hadn't been in his eyes a moment ago: a question. Small, bewildered, still forming. *Are you alright?* it asked, except it also asked something else he wasn't ready to name.

"I'm not sure I appreciate what you're insinuating," Ezekiel said to Darcy, his tone still measured, still professional, though Jesse could hear the slight compression in it, the way a man's voice changes when he is managing something rather than saying something.

"I'm not insinuating *anything*," Darcy said. "I'm simply asking questions. That's what I do." She turned back to Jesse. "You said Ezekiel makes you feel safe. What did you need to feel safe *from*, Jesse?"

"I don't—"

"Let me rephrase," Darcy said. "In your novel, when Marcus chooses safety over his great love — what is *he* running from?"

"Darcy." Ezekiel's voice had an edge now, still controlled, still the voice of a man who is very good at controlled, but the edge was there. "This is supposed to be a celebration of our engagement, not a therapy session about Jesse's creative process."

"You're right," Darcy said. "I apologize. Let's talk about your future together. Ezekiel, where do you see yourself and Jesse

in five years?"

Ezekiel relaxed again, launching into their planned talking points, and his voice was smooth and certain, and Jesse sat beside him and looked at the audience and thought: *I can still do this. I can still hold this together.* Ezekiel was talking about the apartment, about the firm's family policy, about the neighborhood they'd discussed for a house, and Jesse listened to the architecture of the life Ezekiel had designed for them and felt the strange double grief of loving it and knowing it wasn't his.

"And Jesse?" Darcy asked. "Same question. Where do you see yourself in five years?"

The question landed like a stone in still water.

He looked at Ezekiel — at his perfectly pressed suit and his precisely styled hair and his color-coded future — and then he looked at Darcy, and for a moment he could see it all as though from a great distance: the two cameras, the warm studio lights, the audience leaning forward in their seats, and himself, sitting in the middle of it all, a man-shaped structure with nothing true left inside.

"With you," Jesse said, and looked at Ezekiel, and the words came out so quietly that for one terrible heartbeat he thought he'd gotten away with it. "Building what we've planned."

Ezekiel's hand covered his.

Darcy tilted her head. Just slightly. The gesture of a woman who has heard something that doesn't match.

"You said that very quietly, Jesse."

"Did I?"

"You did." She let the silence stretch another beat. "Let me ask you something else. In your novel — the final version, the one where Marcus chooses safety — does Marcus seem *happy*

to you? As his author?"

Jesse's whole body went very still.

"He's at peace," Jesse said carefully. "He knows he made the right choice."

"That's *not* what I asked," Darcy said. "I asked if he was *happy*."

The room was very quiet. Jesse could hear his own pulse. He could feel Ezekiel watching him, could feel the new quality in that gaze — no longer warm and certain, but watchful. Trying to read something. Trying to understand why the conversation felt like it was moving sideways through water.

"Happiness is a complicated—"

"Jesse," Darcy said, and her voice was the gentlest thing in the room. "Do you love Ezekiel?"

The question fell like the last note of a piece of music, after which nothing else is possible.

"Of course he does," Ezekiel said, and his voice was still smooth, still certain, except Jesse could hear the thing underneath it now — the almost-confusion of a man who has just looked at something familiar and found it subtly rearranged, who isn't yet willing to name what he sees. He turned to Jesse with a brief, bracing smile. The smile of a man who is waiting for his partner to confirm the obvious. "We're *engaged*," he said, and managed to make it sound like an answer.

Jesse looked down at his own hands. Ezekiel had answered for him. Not cruelly, not dismissively — Ezekiel would have been genuinely bewildered to hear it characterized that way. He was simply filling in a gap, the way he filled in every gap: efficiently, correctly, with complete confidence that he knew what belonged there. Jesse had let him do it for three years. Had been, if he was honest, grateful for it — for the man who always knew the right answer so that Jesse didn't have to find

one. He was only now beginning to understand the cost of that particular relief.

"I'm asking *Jesse*," Darcy said. "Jesse?"

Jesse looked at Ezekiel. At the brown eyes, still warm, still steady, but something moving in them now — a gathering uncertainty, a question trying to form. He looked at the man who had sat on a storage room floor for an hour and twelve minutes. Who had made the calls. Who had counted breaths. Who had watched him read in an armchair with the soft, private attention of someone who had chosen this, quietly, repeatedly, over years.

"I *care* about him," Jesse said, and his voice cracked in the middle of it. "I respect him. I'm — I'm grateful for *everything* he has given me—"

"That's *not* what I asked," Darcy said.

"I know what love is *supposed* to feel like," Jesse said, and he was fighting now, fighting hard, his voice rough with the effort of it. "I've *seen* it. I've *written* it. The last time I thought I was in love it nearly destroyed me, and maybe — maybe what I have with Ezekiel *is* love. Maybe this is what it feels like when you're not seventeen and reckless and—"

"And what?" Darcy prompted, so softly it was almost private.

"*Burning*," Jesse whispered. And the word left him like something escaping, like something too large for the body that had been containing it. "And burning," he said again, as though he needed to hear it twice to understand what he'd done.

Ezekiel went very still beside him.

Not the stillness of anger — not yet. The stillness of a man in the first moment of a realization that hasn't finished arriving. He was looking at Jesse with an expression that Jesse had

never seen on his face before, and it took a long moment to understand what it was, because Ezekiel didn't do this — didn't do uncertainty, didn't do bewilderment, didn't let himself be caught without an answer to a question he hadn't anticipated.

But that was exactly what it was. He looked, for the first time in the three years Jesse had known him, genuinely lost.

"Jesse," he said. Just the name. Low. Private. Like a hand reaching out in the dark.

Jesse couldn't look at him.

Darcy nodded gently to someone offstage. A production assistant appeared with a folder, and Jesse recognized it before it was even opened, the way you recognize a weapon before it clears the holster.

"What is this?" Ezekiel's voice had changed again. The bewilderment was hardening now, finding a shape, becoming something it could survive as. He looked from the folder to Darcy to Jesse, and in his eyes was the particular expression of a very intelligent man putting together a picture he does not want to see. "What is this?" he asked again, and this time it wasn't a question about the folder.

Darcy opened it. Pulled out pages. Jesse's manuscript. His poems. His truth laid bare under studio lights before a live studio audience and thirty million people at home.

"These are excerpts from Jesse's novel," Darcy said, "and from a collection of poems he's been writing over the years." She held a page up. "Jesse — would you like to tell us yourself who you really wrote them about?"

Ezekiel turned to look at Jesse with the full weight of those brown eyes, and the expression on his face was something Jesse had no name for — part confusion, part the dawning awareness that the confusion itself was an answer, part a very

quiet, very private devastation beginning its long work. He didn't speak. He was waiting. Jesse could feel the waiting like a hand pressed flat against his chest.

"Jesse?" Darcy said. "It's okay. The truth is okay."

Jesse looked at Ezekiel. Looked at the face that had been the floor under his feet for three years, now tilted toward him with an expression that was still — even now, even here — more bewildered than furious, as though some part of Ezekiel could not make the math add up, could not reconcile the man beside him with the shape of what he was beginning to understand.

"Tell me I'm wrong," Ezekiel said quietly. It was barely audible. It wasn't for the cameras or the audience. It was the voice he used in the kitchen on Sunday mornings, or in the dark before sleep. *Tell me I'm misreading this. Tell me there's a version of this that makes sense. Give me somewhere to stand.*

Jesse opened his mouth. Closed it. His hands were shaking.

"I'm sorry," he said, and watched the words land.

Ezekiel blinked. It was the only outward sign — a single slow blink, like a man walking into a room and finding the furniture in entirely the wrong place, finding the walls where the windows should be. He looked at Jesse for a long moment with that bewildered, fractured attention, and then something behind his eyes went quiet, the way a light goes quiet — not off, but changed.

"Explain this to me," Ezekiel said. His voice was very controlled. The control of a man who has chosen it deliberately, over something that would otherwise not be controlled. "Because I am going to need you to explain this to me."

"I can't—" Jesse's voice broke. "Not here. Not like—"

"Not here." Ezekiel made a sound that was not quite a laugh. "You let her bring my fiancé's manuscript to national television

and you'd like to choose a more appropriate venue." He shook his head, and the motion was slow, almost wondering. "Who are they about, Jesse? The poems. The novel. The two men who keep finding their way back to each other." He paused. "Who is it?"

Jesse's hands were shaking in his lap. "Ezekiel—"

"Say his name." It wasn't a shout. It was quieter than a shout, which made it worse. "If you're going to do this, do it. Say his name."

"His name is Anson," Jesse said. And the name came out of him like a confession, like something finally, irreversibly surrendered.

Ezekiel absorbed it. He didn't move. He sat perfectly still in his expensive suit in the bright studio light and absorbed it, and for a long moment his face was simply unreadable — a man standing in the wreckage of a realization, taking inventory.

"How long?" he asked.

"He came back—"

"How long?" The edge in his voice now. The first real edge, sharp enough to cut.

"A few days. The day after you propsed.."

"A few days." Ezekiel nodded slowly, as though this were information he was filing, organizing, placing in its correct folder. "And before these *few days*. Before he came back. The novel. You've been writing about him for years."

It wasn't a question.

"Yes," Jesse whispered.

The audience was completely silent. Even the cameras felt far away.

Ezekiel looked at Jesse the way he might look at a contract with a flaw he'd failed to catch before signing — with a cold,

clear, devastating precision, but underneath it something still human, still raw, the precision not quite covering the wound it was built to protect. He opened his mouth, closed it. Tried a second time.

"I was planning our life," he said. "Last month I was at a dinner with the partners, and they asked about children, and I told them about the neighborhood we'd chosen and the school districts I'd researched and the way Jesse would make a good father because he treats every person he meets like they matter." He stopped. His jaw worked once. "I had the schools *researched*, Jesse."

Jesse pressed his hand over his mouth. A sob was building behind his eyes, too large for the room.

"I was *planning our life*," Ezekiel said again, and this time the word *planning* broke apart in the middle of it, and Jesse understood at last that the plan had been the love — that for Ezekiel, the color-coded tabs and the researched school districts and the 6 AM texts about haircuts were the equivalent of poems, were the closest he knew how to come to *burning*, and that Jesse had looked at all of it and called it control, called it suffocation, called it a beautiful prison, without once understanding that a man who builds a future with such meticulous care is a man who cannot conceive of losing it.

"Did you sleep with him?" Ezekiel asked.

The question was clinical. Precise. But his hands, Jesse saw now, were gripping his own knees, and the knuckles were white.

Jesse's silence was answer enough.

Something changed in Ezekiel's face. The bewilderment completed its transformation. It had taken longer than Jesse had expected — had gone through more stages, had held on

to the possibility of error, of misunderstanding, of a version of events that made sense — and now it was done, and what replaced it was the face of a man who has finally, fully understood, and who will not let himself shatter in front of thirty million people.

"You came home at dawn," Ezekiel said. "You said you fell asleep at your desk." He looked at Jesse with eyes that were very bright. "I made you coffee. You were still wearing your coat and I thought — I thought you looked cold, and I made you coffee."

Jesse made a broken sound.

"You put my ring on and you let me kiss you," Ezekiel said, and his voice cracked once, cleanly, on the word *kiss*, and then he sealed it shut again, and when he continued his voice was the voice he used in bardrooms— flawless, devastating, perfectly structured around a core of controlled fury. "You let me touch you. You came home from another man's bed and you let me—" He stopped. Drew a breath. "And I made you coffee."

"Ezekiel, *please*—"

"*Stop.*" He stood. And in the standing, something in him reorganized itself into the shape it would need to be to get through the next hour and the hours after that. The spine straightened. The jaw set. The hands, still shaking slightly, stilled. "Stop apologizing. Stop saying my name like that. Like I'm something you're worried about breaking." His voice was hard now. "You already broke it, Jesse. You broke it the night you went to him. Everything since then has just been you deciding when to admit it."

"You're right," Jesse whispered.

"I *know* I'm right." The laugh that escaped him was short and ugly and entirely unlike him. "I'm always right. I read

situations correctly. It's what I do. I read everything — contracts, people, rooms — and I *missed* this." He looked at Jesse with something approaching wonder. "I missed it for a *few days*. I held your hands in a green room this morning and counted your breathing and I missed it."

"You didn't—"

"Because I didn't want to see it." His voice dropped. "Because when you love someone you choose not to read certain things. You choose to believe certain things. I chose to believe—"

He stopped, and when he looked at Jesse again the anger was still there but it had thinned, and underneath it was something much more honest: a hurt so straightforward and complete that it needed no amplification.

"I thought if I loved you well enough, consistently enough, you'd eventually stop running. I thought—" He laughed bitterly. "I gave you everything you needed, I fixed the things that needed fixing. I got you out of that falling-apart apartment. I got you away from the people who were using you. I taught you—"

He stopped, and a flicker of something crossed his face — the first moment he seemed to hear himself. He pressed on anyway, because Ezekiel always pressed on.

"I taught you how to be taken seriously. How to walk into a room and not apologize for being there. I *built* things for you, Jesse… I thought stability was something you'd learn to love. I thought *I* was something you'd learn to love. Not just appreciate. *Love*."

"Ezekiel—"

"My colleagues thought I'd lost my mind," Ezekiel said, and there was a bitter pride in it now, the pride of a man revisiting a wound he'd thought had healed.

"A bookstore clerk. A creative writing degree and a manuscript that had never sold and an apartment with a radiator that didn't work. Anson Walsh's name in your medical file." His jaw tightened. "They didn't say it to my face — they're too careful for that — but I heard it. *What is Ezekiel doing? He could have anyone.* I sat across from David Reyes at the directors' dinner and watched him look at you like you were a phase I'd grow out of." He paused. "I didn't care. I *told* myself I didn't care. I thought — I *knew* — that I could show them. That in two years, in five, they'd see what I saw. They'd see who you became." His voice dropped. "I was so certain I could see your potential more clearly than you could see it yourself."

Jesse looked at the floor.

"Did you *ever*?" He asked it simply. Without armor. "Did you ever love me? Not the safety. Not the floor. *Me*."

Jesse couldn't speak. His hands were pressed flat against his thighs and tears were blurring his vision and the answer was somewhere in his chest, complicated and insufficient and too late.

"That's answer enough," Ezekiel said quietly.

He looked at Jesse for a long moment — looked at him the way you look at something you are memorizing, something you know you are about to never see the same way again. Then he pulled the engagement ring from his own finger and set it on the coffee table between them with a precision so careful it was almost tender.

"I won't be the second choice," he said. "I won't be the life you settled for while you were waiting to be brave enough to choose the real one." He reached over and, gently, removed the ring from Jesse's hand too. Set it beside his own. The two rings side by side on the coffee table, small and bright under

the studio lights.

He looked at Jesse one last time, and his eyes were wet, and he did not look away from them.

"I hope you find what you're looking for," he said. "I genuinely do. But I'm done being the proof that you tried."

Then he turned, and walked, and his spine was straight and his shoulders were back, and every inch of him was dignity and devastation wound together, and the audience did not make a sound as he went.

Jesse stood frozen, watching him go, the weight of what he'd destroyed settling over him like snow — quiet, and complete, and cold.

The audience was completely silent.

After Ezekiel's bitter, devastating exit, a heavy silence fell over the stage. Darcy let it linger, allowing the weight of the moment to settle before turning to Jesse with a mix of sympathy and gentle scrutiny.

"Jesse," she began softly, "I can't imagine how difficult that was, for both of you. Infidelity, a broken engagement, shattered trust…these are wounds that cut deep."

Jesse flinched, fresh tears spilling down his cheeks. He nodded jerkily, unable to meet Darcy's eyes.

"You said you were with someone else the night after your engagement. Anson, your ex from high school." Darcy's tone was carefully neutral. "That's quite a reunion. Can you tell us about him? About your history?"

Jesse dragged a hand over his face, visibly struggling to collect himself. "Anson…Anson was my first love. My only love, if I'm being honest with myself."

"But you lost touch after high school?" Darcy probed.

"That's an understatement. There was an incident… Life

took us in different directions. But I never…" Jesse's voice cracked. "I never stopped loving him. Even when I was with Ezekiel, a part of me always belonged to Anson."

Darcy leaned forward, her expression empathetic but intent. "So what happened? The night of your engagement?"

Jesse closed his eyes, shame and yearning warring on his face. "Anson reached out, out of the blue. Asked to meet. And I…I couldn't say no. Didn't *want* to say no."

"Even though you'd just committed yourself to Ezekiel?" Darcy asked pointedly.

A bitter laugh escaped Jesse. "I know. I know how it looks. But seeing Anson again…it was like coming home. Like I could finally breathe after years of suffocating."

Darcy sat back, considering. "That's a powerful connection. The kind most people spend their lives searching for." She paused, choosing her next words carefully. "But Jesse…you had that with Ezekiel. Or at least, *he* believed you did. Can you help us understand? What was missing with Ezekiel that you found with Anson?"

Jesse was quiet for a long moment, visibly grappling with the question. When he finally spoke, his voice was low but certain. "Ezekiel loved the *idea* of me. The *potential* of me. But Anson…" A small, wistful smile touched his lips. "Anson loved the *reality* of me. The flaws, the scars, the silly romantic notions. He saw all of me, and cherished it."

Darcy nodded slowly, understanding dawning. "And that night, after the engagement…?"

"I chose the truth. For once in my life." Jesse looked directly into the camera, his gaze steady despite the tears. "I chose to be seen, wholly and completely. I chose love over fear. Even if…even if it was the wrong way, the wrong time."

Darcy reached out, laying a comforting hand on Jesse's arm. "There's no easy answer here, Jesse. Hearts were broken, trust was shattered. Those consequences are real, and painful." She took a breath, weighing her next move. The audience was spellbound, hanging on every word. "But so is love. Real, raw, honest love." Darcy's eyes flickered offstage for the briefest moment. "The kind of love that waits. That hopes. That shows up." She turned back to Jesse, a slow smile growing. "The kind of love that's waiting in the wings, even now."

Jesse's head snapped up, his heart stuttering to a halt. "What…what are you saying?"

Darcy just smiled wider, gesturing offstage. "Why don't you ask him yourself?"

And there, stepping into the light, was Anson.

Jesse had been bracing for it without knowing he was bracing — had felt Darcy's setup landing like a stage direction, had known on some cellular level what was coming — and still, the sight of him dismantled every defense Jesse had left standing.

He wasn't dressed for television. That was the first thing Jesse noticed, with a rush of something so tender it was almost unbearable. No suit, no careful styling, none of the deliberate packaging the show would have offered him. Just dark jeans and a simple grey shirt and the particular way Anson Donovan occupied space — not aggressively, not performatively, but with the easy, unthinking solidity of a man who had never once needed a room to validate his presence in it. His hair was slightly wrong, like he'd run a hand through it in the wings and then forgotten about it. Like he'd had more important things on his mind.

Jesse's throat closed.

Anson's eyes found him immediately. Not the cameras, not

the audience, not Darcy Quinn with her knowing smile. Jesse. Directly and without hesitation, the way they always had — the way they had across a high school pool deck, across a bookstore threshold, across ten years of silence that had never quite managed to be forgetting.

Those eyes. Jesse had written them seventeen different ways and never gotten them right. Amber was the word he always reached for, but amber was static, amber was preserved, and Anson's eyes were neither. They were warm in the way that late afternoon light is warm — the kind that catches the dust in the air and makes the ordinary world look briefly, unbearably beautiful. They were the eyes of a man who had seen Jesse at his worst and his most terrified and his most dishonest and who was still, somehow, *here*, walking across a television stage with his hair slightly wrong because he had more important things on his mind.

Jesse made a sound he couldn't name. Not a word. Not a sob. Something older than either.

Anson stopped a few feet away. Close enough that Jesse could see the slight tension in his jaw — the only outward sign that he was anything other than completely calm, that this cost him something too, that he had not arrived here easily or without fear. Jesse had learned to read that jaw a long time ago. Had spent years forgetting how, and then the past few days remembering.

"Hi, Pretty Boy," Anson said quietly.

Three words. The same three words from the last text Jesse had ever expected to receive, except now they were spoken aloud, in Anson's actual voice, low and careful and meant only for him, and the audience and the cameras and the lights collapsed to a single vanishing point somewhere behind Jesse's

sternum.

He had been wrung out. He had confessed and wept and watched the man he'd spent three years with walk off a stage with his spine straight and his rings in his pocket and his heart broken in ways Jesse would carry the guilt of for a long time. He had nothing left. He was standing in the ruin of his own choices, in front of thirty million people, with tears drying on his face and his hands still trembling from the effort of all that truth.

And Anson was looking at him like he was the only thing in the room worth looking at.

Not the version of Jesse that had been polished and packaged for public consumption. Not the Jesse of the fairy tale proposal or the media strategy or the blue sweater chosen because it read as innocent on camera. Jesse Valentine with his cat-green eyes swollen from crying and his dirty blonde hair that had gotten too long and his silly romantic notions and his manuscript that had never sold and his scars and his panic attacks and his 4 AM writing sessions and his love of sugary lattes that made no culinary sense.

That Jesse. The whole disaster of him.

Anson took the last few steps and stopped directly in front of him, and lifted one hand, and tucked a strand of hair back from Jesse's face with a gentleness so unhurried it felt like a declaration — like a man who was not performing for anyone, who had simply needed to do this one small thing and had done it.

His thumb grazed Jesse's cheekbone. Just once.

"I told you I'd still be here," Anson said.

Jesse let out a breath that had been building for ten years.

The audience faded away. The lights faded. Darcy Quinn,

the cameras, the coffee table with its two abandoned rings — all of it receded to the edges of Jesse's awareness, leaving only this: Anson's hand, warm against his face. Anson's eyes, steady and sure and full of the particular knowledge of someone who had loved Jesse before Jesse had learned to hide himself, and who had come back anyway, and who was still — through everything, through all of it — looking at him like he was not a project or a potential or a choice that required justification.

Like he was just Jesse. Like that had always been enough.

Jesse pressed his hand over Anson's, holding it against his cheek, and closed his eyes, and felt, for the first time in longer than he could honestly remember, like he had arrived somewhere.

"I wasn't going to come. Told myself I'd burned that bridge too many times already. But then that fierce theater girl from high school showed up at my motel and told me I was a coward if I let you do this on national television without at least giving you a choice."

"Anson—"

"Let me finish. Please."

Anson took a shaky breath.

"I was a mess when we were kids. Angry and scared and so deep in my own darkness I didn't know how to love you without hurting you. That punch, that night—" His voice cracked. "I will regret that for the rest of my life. There's no excuse. There's no making it right. But I need you to know that I've spent every day of the last ten years trying to become someone worthy of a second chance."

Tears were streaming down Jesse's face now.

"I got sober. I learned to be a father to my son. I went to therapy and faced every ugly thing inside me that made me

think violence was an answer to pain. And when Parker's mom left because she couldn't love a man who was in love with a memory…" Anson's laugh was broken. "I finally understood what I'd thrown away." He took a step closer. "I'm not asking you to forget what I did. I'm not even asking for forgiveness. I'm just asking you to believe that I've changed. That I'm not that scared, angry kid anymore. That I'm finally brave enough to love you the way you deserved all along."

Jesse moved without thinking, closing the distance between them. His hands found Anson's face, thumbs tracing the familiar angles of his cheekbones.

"You're the one," Jesse said, his voice strong and certain despite the tears. "Not because you're perfect, but because you're real. Because you see me—all of me. The parts I hide from everyone else, the messy and scared and uncertain parts. You see them and you don't look away."

Anson's lips curved into a small, hopeful smile. And then Jesse was kissing him, there in front of millions of people, kissing him like he was air and water and truth all at once.

The audience erupted, but Jesse barely heard it over the sound of his own heart finally beating in the right rhythm. When they pulled apart, Anson rested his forehead against Jesse's.

"You're sure?" he whispered. "Because once we do this, once it's real…"

"I'm sure." Jesse smiled through his tears. "I'm terrified and sure and so fucking in love with you."

And Anson kissed him. Not the careful, measured kisses Ezekiel had given him—kisses that tasted like good decisions and five-year plans. This was something else entirely. This was a decade of longing compressed into a single point of

contact. Every poem Jesse had never sent, every night Anson had woken reaching for someone who wasn't there, every moment they'd both spent convincing themselves that safe was enough. Anson's hands framed Jesse's face like he was something precious and breakable, thumbs brushing away tears. Jesse melted into him, fingers clutching at Anson's shirt, trying to eliminate every molecule of space between them.

The kiss tasted like salt and truth and coming home to a place he'd convinced himself he'd imagined. It tasted like every goodbye they'd ever said and every hello they'd been too afraid to speak. Jesse felt it in every cell of his being—the rightness of it, the way his body recognized Anson's like a language he'd been born speaking but forced himself to forget.

His heart synchronized with Anson's heartbeat, and for the first time in ten years, Jesse felt like he could take a full breath.

This was what transformation felt like.

Not destruction, but rebirth.

When they finally pulled apart, Anson rested his forehead against Jesse's, both of them trembling, both of them breathing hard.

"There you are. There's my Pretty Boy. I've been looking for for ten years," Anson whispered, his voice wrecked.

And Jesse realized he'd been looking too.

Had been lost this whole time, trying to find his way back to this moment, this man, this feeling of being utterly, terrifyingly, beautifully alive.

The audience erupted, but Jesse barely heard it over the sound of his own heart finally beating the way it was always meant to.

NIKKI

The audience erupted in gasps and tears and applause. Darcy Quinn was beaming, probably already thinking about her Emmy nomination.

But Nikki only had eyes for Jesse and Anson. Finally, finally getting their moment in the light.

"That," Sandra breathed beside her, "was better than *any* script we could have *ever* written."

Nikki smiled through her own tears. "Sometimes the best stories write themselves. They just need a little push onto the stage."

On set, Jesse and Anson broke apart, foreheads pressed together, breathing each other's air. The cameras caught it all - the tears, the trembling hands, the way they looked at each other like nothing else existed.

This was the love story America needed to see.

Raw. Real. Redemptive.

And most importantly.

True.

* * *

The studio fell silent as Darcy stood, her presence commanding yet compassionate. She looked out at the audience, then at Jesse, Anson, and Ezekiel, her expression thoughtful.

"Tonight, we've witnessed something *extraordinary*," she began, her voice steady and resonant. "We've seen that love isn't about perfection. It isn't about the stories we craft to please others or the images we present to the world. True love—the kind that changes us—is raw, imperfect, and brave. It asks us to strip away the masks we wear, to face the fears

we've buried, and to step into the light as our whole, unfiltered selves."

She turned toward Jesse, her gaze soft but piercing. "Jesse Valentine has shown us what it means to choose yourself. To walk away from safety and stability, not because they aren't good, but because they aren't *real.* He's shown us that sometimes, the hardest person to be honest with is yourself—and that choosing truth over comfort isn't just an act of courage; it's an act of love."

Her eyes swept the audience and lingered on the cameras. "We live in a world where social media shapes how we see each other—and how we see ourselves. We're told to curate our lives, to show only the highlight reel, to chase perfection for likes, shares, and viral moments. But the truth? The truth doesn't trend. The truth doesn't fit neatly into a hashtag. The truth is messy, complicated, and deeply human. And tonight, Jesse reminded us that real love, real life, and real courage don't come from what we project online—they come from what we hold close, what we fight for, what we choose when *no one else* is watching."

Her gaze returned to Jesse, her smile warm. "Jesse Valentine has reminded us that the greatest love story we'll ever tell isn't the one we broadcast to the world—it's the one we write for ourselves, in the quiet moments when we decide to be who we truly are. It's the one that lets us look in the mirror and say, 'This is me, and I am enough.'"

The room was still, the weight of her words sinking in.

"Tonight isn't just about Jesse or Anson or even this moment. It's about all of us. It's about finding the strength to rewrite our stories, to walk away from what no longer serves us, and to take the leap toward what sets our souls on fire."

Darcy paused, her gaze sweeping the room, then landing on Jesse one last time. Her smile softened, warm and knowing.

"Because in the end, love isn't about being perfect—it's about being brave. And the bravest choice of all is to love yourself first."

The audience erupted into applause, the weight of her words lingering in the air.

The audience erupted into applause, but it wasn't just the sound of approval—it was an acknowledgment, a collective breath drawn in the presence of something raw and true.

Nikki and Jesse's eyes met.

Jesse's heart swelled with a mix of gratitude and awe as he looked at Nikki.

He mouthed a silent "thank you" to her, and she nodded, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

Anson's hand tightened around Jesse's, grounding him in the moment. "You okay, Pretty Boy?"

Jesse turned to him, a smile breaking across his face. "I'm more than okay. I'm *free*."

10

FREE BOY

The stage lights dimmed as the show cut to commercial. Jesse and Anson stood frozen for a moment, still holding each other, neither quite believing what had just happened.

"Come on," Nikki appeared at their side, her eyes shining with tears and triumph. "Let's get you two somewhere private before the PR vultures descend."

She led them through a maze of hallways, past producers already on their phones spinning the story, past Ezekiel being comforted by his team (he met Jesse's eyes for just a moment, nodded once with something like grace, then looked away), past green rooms full of stunned staff members.

Finally, they reached a quiet dressing room at the end of the hall. Nikki ushered them inside.

"I'll give you a minute," she said, squeezing Jesse's hand. "But just a minute. There are some people who've been waiting a very long time to see you."

She left, closing the door behind her.

Jesse and Anson stood in the sudden silence, the reality of

what they'd done settling over them like snow.

"I can't believe you came," Jesse whispered.

Anson's laugh was shaky. "I can't believe you actually chose this. Chose us."

"I chose myself," Jesse corrected, then smiled. "Which apparently means choosing you."

Anson pulled him close, and for a long moment they just held each other, breathing in sync, hearts pounding against each other's chests.

"What happens now?" Jesse asked against Anson's shoulder.

"I don't know." Anson's hands traced patterns on Jesse's back. "But we'll figure it out. Together this time."

Jesse pulled back enough to look at him. "I'm scared."

"Me too, Pretty Boy. Me too."

A knock on the door made them both jump.

"Jesse?" A voice he hadn't heard in ten years, deeper now but still achingly familiar. "It's Noah. Can we… can we come in?"

Jesse's breath caught. He looked at Anson, who nodded encouragingly.

"Yeah," Jesse called out, his voice breaking. "Yeah, come in."

The door opened, and there they were. Noah, tall and lean in a button-down shirt and khakis, every inch the successful lawyer. Kevin, broader and softer, wearing a paint-stained jacket over a vintage band t-shirt, his hair longer than Jesse remembered.

Both of them had tears streaming down their faces.

"Jesse," Kevin choked out, and then he was crossing the room, pulling Jesse into a crushing hug. "Oh God, Jesse. We've missed you so much."

Noah followed more slowly, his composure cracking as he wrapped his arms around both of them. "We've been trying to

reach you for years. Every Christmas card, every text, every—" His voice broke. "We thought you didn't want us anymore."

Jesse was sobbing now, all the years of separation and grief pouring out. "I thought you hated me. I thought Dad turned you against me, that you blamed me for leaving—"

"No." Noah pulled back, gripping Jesse's shoulders. "No, never. We understood why you had to go. We just… we wanted you to know you didn't have to go alone."

"The wedding invitations," Kevin said, wiping his eyes. "My gallery shows, Noah's graduation, every family milestone—we sent them all. Not because we expected you to come, but because we wanted you to know the door was always open."

"I didn't think I deserved to come back," Jesse admitted. "Not after everything with Dad, with Mom dying and me not being there—"

"Stop." Noah's voice was firm. "Listen to me. Mom's death wasn't your fault. Dad's hatred wasn't your fault. And you always deserved to be part of this family."

Noah reached into his jacket and pulled out an envelope, worn soft with handling. "Mom left this for you. She wrote it a few months before she died, made me promise to give it to you when I saw you again."

Jesse's hands shook as he took it. The envelope had his name written in his mother's familiar looping script.

"I'll read it later—" he started, but Kevin shook his head.

"Read it now. She'd want you to read it now."

Jesse opened the envelope carefully, unfolding the letter inside. Anson's hand found his, steadying him as he began to read.

My dearest Jesse,

If you're reading this, I'm gone, and I'm so sorry I didn't

get to see the man you've become. But I need you to know something, and I need you to hear it from me: I always knew, sweetheart. From the time you were small, watching your brothers roughhouse while you sat in the corner with your books and your poems. From the first time you mentioned a boy's name with that particular softness in your voice.

I knew, and I loved you. I loved you exactly as you are.

Your father… he's afraid of things he doesn't understand. He thinks strength means rigidity, that love means control. But you know better than that. You've always known that the bravest thing you can do is be soft, be open, be real.

I thought I was protecting you by staying silent, by trying to keep the peace. But silence isn't love, and peace built on pain isn't worth keeping. I hope you know how proud I am of you—not for what you've done, but for who you are. Your heart, your kindness, your courage. Never stop being brave, my boy.

If you ever doubt yourself, remember this: you are enough. Just as you are. You are worthy of love, exactly as you are.

With all my heart,

Mom

Tears blurred Jesse's vision as he folded the letter carefully, holding it to his chest. "She knew," he whispered. "She always knew."

Noah stepped forward, placing a hand on Jesse's shoulder. "She did. And so do we."

Kevin joined them, his voice breaking. "I'm so sorry, Jesse. For everything. For not standing up for you when Dad went after you. For not being there when you needed us."

"I'm sorry too," Noah said. "I was eighteen and scared and I didn't know how to help. But I should have tried harder. We

both should have."

Jesse pulled both of them into a hug, the years of distance and pain melting away. For the first time in a long time, he felt like he wasn't alone.

When Jesse finally pulled back from his brothers, his eyes met Anson's, who had been standing quietly to the side, giving them space.

"There's someone I want you to meet," Jesse said, holding out his hand to Anson.

Anson stepped forward, taking Jesse's hand and squeezing it reassuringly. The touch sent a familiar spark through Jesse's body, grounding him in the chaos of the moment.

"Noah, Kevin," Jesse said, his voice steady despite the tears still glistening in his eyes. "This is Anson. He's…" Jesse's voice caught. "He's the love of my life."

Anson stepped forward, his usual confidence tempered with nervousness. He shook Noah's hand first, his grip firm but careful. "It's good to finally meet you. I've heard a lot about you both over the years."

Noah studied him for a moment, lawyer's eyes assessing. Then his expression softened. "If Jesse's chosen you, that's good enough for me. But just so you know…" His lips quirked into the faintest hint of a protective smile. "You hurt him again, and we'll have a problem. I'm a lawyer now, and Kevin knows people."

Anson's smile was small but genuine. "Understood. Though I should mention—I already spent ten years punishing myself for what I did. You'd be hard-pressed to do worse than I've done to myself."

Kevin, meanwhile, wasted no time pulling Anson into a bear hug. "Thank you," he whispered fiercely, his voice breaking.

"For loving him. For coming back. For being brave enough to show up today."

Anson's arms tightened around Kevin briefly before letting go. "It's all I've ever wanted. To love him right this time."

Jesse watched the exchange with his heart swelling. The fractured pieces of his life—his family, his love, his truth—were finally coming together.

Another knock interrupted the moment. Amber Donovan stood in the doorway, phone in hand, a complicated expression on her face.

"Sorry to interrupt," she said. "But someone's been waiting very impatiently to hear from his dad."

Anson's face lit up. "Parker?"

Amber nodded, hitting the speakerphone button. A young voice filled the room, breathless with excitement.

"Dad? Did you do it? Did you get him back?"

Anson's eyes never left Jesse's face. "Yeah, buddy. I did."

"Is he there? Can I talk to him?"

Jesse leaned toward the phone, his voice shaking with emotion. "Hi Parker."

"J.V. Stars!" Parker's excitement burst through the speaker. "You *really* chose my dad! I told him you would! I *told* him—"

"Slow down, buddy," Anson laughed, wiping his eyes.

"When can I meet him? Like, actually meet him? Can it be soon? Grandma says I can't ask but I'm asking anyway because this is important—"

Jesse glanced at Anson, saw the hope and fear in his eyes, and made a decision. "How about next weekend? If your dad's okay with it."

"Are you serious?" Both Parker and Anson spoke at once.

"Completely serious. I think it's time I met the person who's

been keeping your dad honest all these years."

Through the phone, they could hear Parker whooping with joy, already telling someone in the background the news.

Amber smiled despite herself. "I'll bring him. But Jesse?" Her voice turned serious. "He's a good kid who's been through a lot. Don't make promises you can't keep."

"I won't," Jesse said firmly. "I'm done with that. No more lies, no more pretending. Just… truth. However messy it gets."

Amber studied him for a long moment, then nodded. "Good. Because you're about to become very important to my son, and I won't let *anyone* hurt him."

"I wouldn't expect anything less," Jesse replied.

After Amber left to calm an overexcited Parker, Anson pulled Jesse aside.

"You sure about this?" he asked quietly. "Meeting Parker, getting involved with all the complicated parts of my life?"

Jesse cupped Anson's face. "I'm sure about *you*. The rest we'll figure out as we go."

"Wait," Nikki said from the doorway, where she'd been watching with Maria at her side. Her theater-trained composure finally cracked, tears spilling freely. "I need a minute with my boys."

She sat between Jesse and Anson, taking one of each of their hands. Her voice, when it came, was thick with emotion. "Jesse Valentine, you climbed through my window at eight AM after your first night together, glowing like you'd swallowed all the stars you wrote poems about. And then I watched that light dim, year after year, while you tried to convince yourself that safe was enough. I held you through the hospital visit, crafted lies about falling down stairs, and watched you build walls around your heart."

She turned to Anson, her smile wobbling. "And you, Anson Donovan. God, I've spent a decade wanting to hate you. But watching you get sober, watching you learn to love your son, watching you finally become brave enough to love Jesse the way he deserves…" She squeezed their hands. "You grew into the man I always knew you could be."

"Nikki—" Jesse's voice cracked, but she wasn't finished.

"Do you know what makes me happiest?" Her eyes sparkled through tears. "That this time, the love story I helped write isn't just for an audience. It's *real*. You're both finally ready for it to be real." She looked at their joined hands, at the way they couldn't stop gravitating toward each other. "And I get to say I was there for both beginnings - the messy first one, and now this beautiful second chance."

Anson pulled her into a fierce hug, and Jesse wrapped his arms around them both. "We couldn't have done this without you," Anson murmured into her hair.

"I know," she laughed through her tears. "Someone had to be the fairy godmother in this story. Though I prefer 'dramatic intervention specialist.'"

Maria stepped forward, hugging Nikki from behind. "You did good, babe. Terrifying, but good."

"Speaking of which," Nikki straightened, wiping her eyes. "I should probably mention that I quit my temp job approximately two hours ago when I told off a producer who called Jesse's confession 'unscripted gold.' Turns out I have opinions about exploiting people's emotional breakdowns for ratings."

"Nikki!" Jesse gasped. "You didn't have to—"

"Please. I've been wanting to quit that soul-crushing place for months. This just gave me a better exit story." She grinned. "Besides, I have a show to get back to in New York. But first,

you two have some celebrating to do."

A knock interrupted them. Darcy Quinn stood there, her expression gentle.

"Sorry to interrupt, but…" She entered, closing the door. "Jesse, what you did out there? That wasn't just good TV. That was truth. And truth? That's revolutionary."

She sat across from them. "I've done thousands of interviews. But I've never seen someone choose themselves so beautifully. You didn't just share your story - you showed people it's never too late to rewrite their ending."

"Thank you," Jesse said softly. "For letting us tell the real story."

"No," Darcy smiled. "Thank you for being brave enough to tell it. Now, you might want to see *this*."

She held up her tablet, showing them the social media feeds already exploding with reactions:

#ChooseTruth trending worldwide

That wasn't just TV, that was someone saving their own life in real time

I've been engaged to someone safe for 3 years. I just called it off. Thank you @JesseValentine

My son just came out to me after watching. Said if Jesse could be brave, so could he

When he said "*I choose truth over comfort*" my whole world shifted. Three months dating and I finally understand what love is supposed to feel like #JesseValentine #RealLove

Cancelled my wedding venue this morning. Best money I ever lost. If Jesse can choose himself, so can I #AuthenticLove #NoMoreSettling

My daughter asked why I was crying. Told her some-

times tears mean you're watching someone become who they were always meant to be #TrueLoveWins #Jesse-Valentine

Been with the wrong person for 7 years because I was too scared to be alone. Not anymore. #ChoosingMyself #RealLoveOrNothing

"The world's watching," Darcy said. "And they're rooting for you. *Both* of you."

After Darcy left, the small dressing room felt impossibly full—Jesse, Anson, Noah, Kevin, Nikki, and Maria all crowded together in various states of emotional exhaustion and joy.

"So," Kevin said, breaking the comfortable silence. "What now?"

Jesse looked around at all of them—his brothers who'd never stopped trying to reach him, his best friend who'd orchestrated this beautiful chaos, the man he'd been too scared to love properly the first time, and felt something settle in his chest.

"Now," he said, "we go home. Wherever that is."

"Detroit!" Anson asked carefully. "It's always been home!"

"Sounds perfect," Jesse said. "At least for *now*. I have a manuscript to rewrite, this time with the ending I actually want." He looked at his brothers. "And a family to get to know again. If you'll have me."

Noah pulled him into another hug. "Always. We're not losing you again."

"You could get a small studio apartment for now. Finish your book," Kevin offered. "I have gallery contacts here in Detroit. Could make it a regular thing."

"I'd like that," Jesse said, his voice muffled against Noah's

shoulder.

Anson's hand found Jesse's. "I can visit on weekends when I don't have Parker. Or he could come too… Or if that's too much, come stay weekends at my place… Meet him, get to know *that* part of my life."

"I can't wait for that," Jesse asked, pulling back to look at him.

"Let's go with the flow," Anson said. "Until we figure out what comes next. I'm not rushing this, Pretty Boy. We have time now. Real time, not stolen moments."

Jesse kissed him softly. "Time sounds perfect."

Outside the dressing room, they could hear the chaos continuing—producers, PR teams, the machinery of media trying to package what had just happened into something consumable. But in this small room, surrounded by the people who actually mattered, Jesse felt something he hadn't felt in ten years.

Peace.

Not the false peace of a carefully constructed life, but the real peace that comes from finally telling the truth.

"Ready to face the world?" Nikki asked, gesturing toward the door.

Jesse took a deep breath, squeezed Anson's hand, and smiled at his brothers.

"Yeah," he said. "I think I am."

11

REAL BOY

One Year Later

Jesse traced his fingers over the last page of his manuscript, pausing at the scene that had changed everything. The memory was so vivid: one week after the Darcy Quinn show, a package arrived at Dapple & Mays. Maria set it on his desk with a careful look.

"It's from Ezekiel."

Inside, he'd found his old green cardigan—the one from the gallery opening, which had disappeared months ago when Ezekiel had insisted on "updating" his wardrobe. With it was a note:

Jesse,

Found this while packing up your things. Remember that night at Jaime's gallery? You wore this and talked about books for hours, completely unselfconscious, absolutely beautiful in your enthusiasm. I fell in love with that version of you—then spent three years trying to change it.

I'm sorry about that.

I thought I was helping you become better, but really, I was just making you become more like me. Controlled. Safe. Perfect.

The you who chose love over safety on national television? That's the real Jesse Valentine. The one I met that first night. The one who deserves to be exactly who he is.

Be happy. Really happy. Not just perfect happy.

-E

P.S. Your manuscript about Marcus and Jason? I finally read it. The right way. With my shoes off, in a recliner, and a bunch of hot cocoa. It's beautiful. Raw and real and honest. Everything I was too afraid to be.

"*'And in the end,'*" Jesse read from the final page, "*'it wasn't about choosing between safe and dangerous, perfect and flawed. It was about choosing the truth. About being brave enough to burn and real enough to rise from the ashes.'*"

He closed the book - *his* book - and looked out at the crowd packed into Dapple & Mays. Maria beamed from behind the café counter, her purple hair now streaked with silver. The same leather armchairs that had witnessed countless stories now held a new generation of readers, all clutching copies of "**Pretty Boy: A Love Story.**"

"Any questions?" Jesse asked, smiling as dozens of hands shot up.

"Did you really write all those poems?"

Jesse laughed, "Yes, I sure did. I had my inspiration. My muse, Anson."

"How did you know it was worth the risk?"

Jesse's smile softened as he considered the question. His eyes drifted to the back of the room, where Anson leaned against the wall, arms crossed, a proud grin on his face.

"I didn't," Jesse admitted. "Not at first. But sometimes, the most beautiful things in life come from taking that leap into the unknown." He paused, his gaze still locked with Anson's. "When you find something - or someone - that makes your soul sing, you owe it to yourself to listen to that music."

"Are you and Anson still—"

Jesse's eyes twinkled as he interrupted the question with a chuckle. "Are we still together? Well, I think I'll let him answer that."

All heads turned as Anson pushed off from the wall and began making his way through the crowd. His stride was as confident as ever, but Jesse could see the hint of shyness in his eyes—the same endearing vulnerability that had first captured his heart.

"Pretty Boy's got a thing for dramatic timing," Anson called out, halfway to the podium. Parker trailed behind him, carrying his own well-worn copy of the book. At eleven, he was all long limbs and artistic soul, his sketchbook full of illustrations inspired by his father's love story.

"Dad," Parker rolled his eyes, but he was grinning. "You're *just* as dramatic as Jesse is."

"Actually," Jesse said, his smile widening, "your dad's a bit more dramatic than me. He insisted on being next to me if this question was asked."

Anson reached the front, and just like that night on television, everything else faded away. He still looked at Jesse like he was starlight made flesh, still touched him like he might disappear.

"Well, I'm here. Tell them about the new ending, Pretty Boy."

"The new ending," Jesse smiled, leaning into Anson's touch as he joined him at the podium. "Well, that's still being written. But I can tell you how this year's chapter is going…"

The audience leaned forward eagerly. They'd all read the book - the story of two boys falling in love in a high school library, of fear and loss and redemption, of finding their way back to each other on live television. But this was new. This was now.

"Show them," Anson whispered, his eyes dancing with that familiar mix of danger and love.

Jesse held up his left hand, where a *simple* silver band caught the light.

Not an engagement ring this time - a wedding band.

Matching the one on Anson's finger.

"We got married last month," Jesse said as the crowd erupted in cheers. "Just us, Parker, and our closest family and friends. Under the stars, of course. It was so hard keeping it secret, but we were determined to maintain some privacy."

"You deserve some," a man in the front row said, smiling.

From their spots near the café counter, Jesse's brothers Noah and Kevin beamed. It had taken time - months of careful conversations, of rebuilding trust, of healing old wounds - but they were here. Noah had even been Jesse's best man, his speech about second chances and brotherly love leaving everyone in tears. Kevin, now twenty-two and so different from the crying thirteen-year-old Jesse had left behind, had read one of Jesse's earliest poems during the ceremony.

"With poetry," Parker added proudly. "Dad wrote his own vows in poem form. They were actually good."

"Actually good?" Anson pretended offense. "I learned from the best, didn't I, Pretty Boy?"

"I love your poetry, Ans. We got all sorts of offers from television networks. They wanted us to do a reality show…but we wanted our second chance together to be quiet. Private.

So, I wrote the book I've always wanted to…but this is Jesse and Anson's story, not Marcus and Jason's. It's *real*. The truth." Jesse smiled, catching Noah's eye. His brother nodded, remembering how he used to listen to Jesse read stories late at night when they were kids. Some bonds couldn't be broken, just bent and reformed stronger.

Anson's eyes softened. "Tell them the other news."

Jesse's hand found Anson's, squeezing tight. "We're opening a youth center. For LGBTQ+ kids who need a safe place to be themselves. There's going to be a library, of course. And a pool."

"Because sometimes," Anson continued, "the bravest thing you can do is dive in. Whether it's into water, or love, or your own truth."

"The center's going to have a writer's group too," Parker chimed in. "Dad's going to teach swimming, and Jesse's going to teach poetry, and I'm going to teach art!"

A hand shot up from the middle of the crowd. A young man, maybe college age, with eyes that held a familiar pain.

"Mr. Donovan? In the book, Jesse talks about your drinking… about how, in your own words, it made you brave enough to love him in secret but mean enough to hurt him in public. How… how did you stop?"

Anson's hand went to his pocket, pulling out a silver chip. He held it up, letting it catch the light.

"Two years," he said, his voice carrying through the quiet store. "Got this chip *this morning* actually. My last drink was the night Nikki came to the hotel. I was sitting in Room 112, drunk enough to think I'd lost him forever, when she showed up and kicked my ass into gear."

He turned the chip over in his fingers. "Used to think I

needed alcohol to be brave. To face who I was, what I *felt*. But you want to know real courage?" He pulled something else from his pocket - a worn, creased piece of paper. "It's keeping this poem for twelve years. It's getting sober. It's standing up on national television and choosing love over fear."

"Is that—" someone gasped.

"The first poem he ever wrote me," Anson nodded. "About chlorine and stars and a boy too scared to love him back. I've carried it every day since he slipped it into my swim bag. Through marriage, divorce, recovery… it was always there. Reminding me what real love feels like."

Jesse reached for Anson's hand, their fingers intertwining. "Now he writes his own poetry," he said softly. "Sober words about love and redemption and the kind of courage that comes from facing yourself in the light."

The young man who'd asked the question wiped his eyes. "So it gets better?"

"No," Anson said honestly. "*You* get better. *You* get braver. *You* get real." He held up the chip again. "One day at a time."

Someone else called out, "Any regrets? About how it all happened?"

Jesse thought about it. About the viral video that had trapped him in a perfect lie. About Nikki's dramatic intervention on national television. About the mess and pain and beauty of choosing genuine love over safe love.

"Only one," he said finally. "That it took us ten years to be brave enough for this." He looked at Anson, at the man who had grown from that scared boy in the library. "But I wouldn't call it a regret. I think we *needed* those years. To become who we are. To be ready for *this* kind of love. I think our fire burned a little too intense for two boys of *that* age," Jessie concluded

with a laugh.

"Pretty Boy," Anson murmured, and kissed him right there in front of everyone.

The crowd cheered, but Jesse barely heard them. He was too busy falling in love all over again, just like he had that first day in the library, just like he would every day for the rest of their lives.

Later, after the crowd had thinned and Parker was showing Kevin his latest drawings, Noah pulled Jesse aside.

"Mom would have loved this," he said softly. "All of it. The book, the youth center… him." He nodded toward Anson, who was deep in conversation with a young teen about swimming techniques.

"Yeah?" Jesse's voice caught.

"Yeah." Noah squeezed his shoulder. "She always said you had the biggest heart of all of us. Big enough to forgive. Big enough to love without limits."

Jesse watched his family - Parker teaching Kevin to draw dragons, Anson gesturing animatedly about butterfly strokes, Maria refilling coffee cups with her knowing smile. This was what real looked like. Messy and beautiful and true.

Some love stories didn't need perfect endings.

They just needed to be real.

And sometimes, being real meant getting your whole heart back - piece by piece, brother by brother, love by love.

Until you were finally, completely whole.

THE END